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Environmental Justice and Grassroots Environmentalism  
in the San Francisco Bay Area

Pamela Tau Lee

COMMUNITY AND UNION ORGANIZING, AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE  
SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA,  
1967-2000

With an Introduction by  
Luke W. Cole

Interviews Conducted by  
Carl Wilmsen  
in 1999

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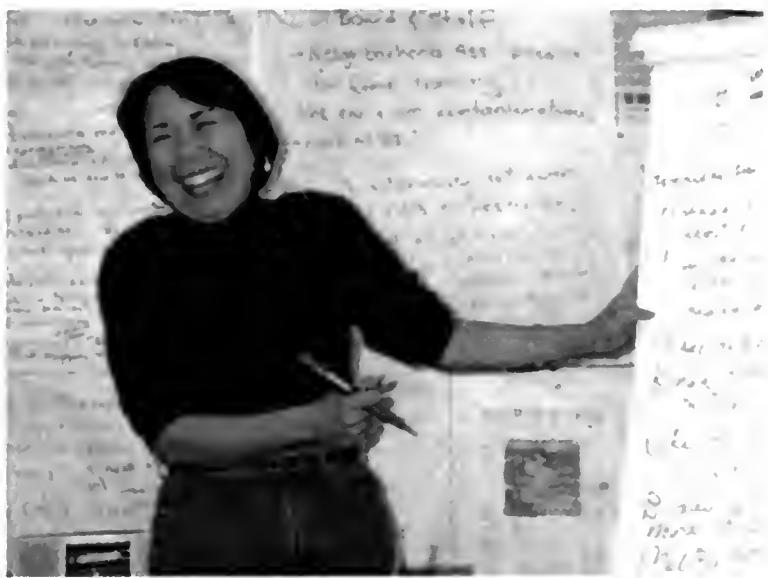
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Pamela Tau Lee



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## INTRODUCTION by Luke W. Cole

The San Francisco Bay Area is blessed in many ways: stunning natural beauty, a global center of finance and high technology, a locale of unparalleled intellectual achievement and educational resources, one of the most diverse and polyglot metropolitan areas in the world. These riches have come at a price, however. A significant despoilation of the environment, coupled with racial segregation and a tremendous stratification of income, mean that not all Bay Area residents share in its bounty. Hundreds of toxic sites, ancient polluting power plants, mammoth oil refineries, lead-contaminated housing, poisoned workers—all of these environmental ills are the costs of our wealth. Santa Clara County, the home of Silicon Valley and its glittering high-tech promise, also hosts more Superfund toxic clean-up sites than any other county in the United States. Bayview-Hunter's Point in San Francisco has some of the highest rates of breast cancer in the world.

Fortunately, the San Francisco Bay Area also has the highest density, per capita, of environmental justice activists in the United States. The many tributaries that feed the national Environmental Justice Movement are or have been present here, as well—the labor movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the farmworker struggle, the anti-toxics movement. Indeed, some of these tributaries have their headwaters here. American Indians occupied Alcatraz from November 1969 to June 1971, and some of the leaders of that occupation were central players in the American Indian Movement; today's national Indigenous Environmental Network grew out of those earlier struggles. The Asian Pacific Environmental Network, a national network catalyzed by Bay Area Asian Americans, was born and still lives in Oakland. The legal piece to the environmental justice movement had an early spark in the 1969 suit on behalf of six migrant farmworkers that ultimately banned the deadly pesticide DDT, a suit brought by Ralph Santiago Abascal of San Francisco-based California Rural Legal Assistance. The list of the Bay Area's contributions to the environmental justice movement is long and varied.

It is thus fitting that some of its leaders' stories are gathered here. The five leaders whose oral histories make up this collection are giants in the Bay Area movement, and many are leaders of national stature.

Carl Anthony is a visionary, a man whose many hats have included academic, architect, urban planner, planning commission chair, military base conversion director, mediator, convener, author, editor and now funder. Beyond Carl's alacrity in almost every situation, beyond his path-breaking work on urban environmentalism, even beyond his institutional legacy in the many groups he has formed, focused, fueled and furthered, is his wonderful ability to bring people together. Whether it was warring parties in West Berkeley, who made peace and brought sustainable development to that oft-neglected neighborhood, or competitors for resources at newly-closed military bases, Carl has

brought people together to talk and to discover their common ground and--more often than not--further the common good. Sometimes, Carl's bringing people together for a conversation across divides--be it ideology, class, race, education or experience--can be the achievement in and of itself, so even those dialogues which in retrospect may seem ephemeral, like Urban Habitat's long colloquy with Earth Island, leave everyone involved enriched. Carl's oral history here is another of his gifts to the Bay Area, and its readers will be similarly enriched.

Henry Clark could be called a professor of social change, so deep are his roots and so broad is his experience in its movements. One of the few environmental justice activists who is also a Ph.D., Henry is an instantly recognizable figure at Bay Area political events in his trademark tiny gold glasses. An indefatigable activist who has operated out of a storefront office on McDonald Avenue in Richmond for more than fifteen years, Henry walks the walk. While others talk of "working with the community," Henry is "the community"--a lifelong Richmond resident, still there and still fighting. His resourcefulness in working with residents of Richmond--an extremely economically depressed African American town facing more than its share of environmental and social challenges--in fighting some of the largest polluters in the world, and winning, is instructive. His persistence in the face of adversity, his seemingly Sisyphean struggle, has brought concrete change to the lives of Richmond residents and has been an example to activists across the U.S. In one small anecdote that demonstrates Henry's effectiveness, in the early 1990s the chairman of Chevron, at that time the largest oil company in the United States, told stockholders at an annual meeting that Chevron had two political problems: its investments in South Africa, and the West County Toxics Coalition.

Pam Tau Lee has been instrumental in focusing the Movement on the concerns of workers, particularly workers of color, in dangerous occupations, helping make workplace safety an environmental justice issue. Her trainings through the Labor Occupational Health Program have reached thousands of workers and educators. Pam has also been a key player in many of the institutions that have shaped the national Environmental Justice Movement. Her involvement with the National Toxics Campaign helped that organization undertake an agonizing self-assessment of racial and class privilege, one which the group could not ultimately survive. She was there at the beginning of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), one of the first appointees to that body, and one who helped steer its initial course. She is a founding board member of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network. She is a catalyst for change, with national influence.

Ted Smith has achieved an enviable status as an activist: his organization is celebrating its twentieth birthday this year, and some of his best ideas have been codified as federal law. Ideas that percolated up from the work of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition--like hazardous materials and underground storage tank ordinances, the Toxics Release Inventory and community right-to-know--are now accepted parts of our regulatory framework. Ted had the prescience and fortuity to take on the high-tech industry from the start, and has long been a sage prophet of the computer industry's

environmental excesses. While his policy work is perhaps most far-reaching in its impact, his coalition and network building is as important and makes the policy work happen. Ted's role as a cagey political strategist is well captured in this oral history, and is a handbook for those who follow.

Ahmadia Thomas is the volunteer's volunteer. From the Girl Reserves as a young adult, to the VISTA program in the 1960s, to welfare rights organizing in the 1970s, to the Citizens Action League and ACORN in the 1980s, to the West County Toxics Coalition and the Gray Panthers in the 1990s, Mrs. Thomas has had volunteering for community service and social change as her life's vocation. Her commitment, demonstrated on the ground and in the office in nearly fifty years of movement work of one form or another, is remarkable.

Indeed, a common thread in each of their stories is that of commitment to social justice. It is also instructive that none of these activists emerged out of the environmental movement. They all came to environmental justice work from the justice side: out of civil rights and poverty law work (Smith), welfare rights organizing (Thomas), labor (Lee) or work against the Vietnam War and apartheid (Clark). All of them are "lifers," however--among the few who have devoted their careers to ending injustice. Their example is our inspiration, and our challenge.

The story of the Bay Area is one of migration, and the activists' stories collected here are no exception. Henry Clark and Pam Tau Lee were both born here, but to parents who arrived from elsewhere. Henry's parents came from the southern U.S., and Pam's from Fresno. Interestingly, Pennsylvania gave us both Carl Anthony and Ahmadia Thomas, while New York yielded Ted Smith. The magnet for talent that is the Bay Area is demonstrated here; I leave for other students of social movements to distill the particular things in the Bay Area that make it such a fertile ground.

I have been fortunate to know and work with these talented activists. Henry and Mrs. Thomas and I have walked the picket line at Chevron's gates, and I have represented the West County Toxics Coalition in court. Pam and I both served on U.S. EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. Ted and I have been panelists together at conferences. Carl and I have had a fruitful collaboration for more than a decade, publishing the *Race, Poverty & the Environment* journal; I was one of the original board members of the Urban Habitat Project. The Bay Area environmental justice community is large, but it is also small enough that we know each other and work with each other, and I am privileged to have had these five as my teachers and to call them my friends.

This impressive collection of oral histories is hopefully merely a prelude to a larger effort to gather the lives and lessons of Bay Area environmental justice leaders. The oral historian's work is set, with activist journalist Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez, Indigenous Women's Network founder Nilak Butler, occupational safety and health pioneer Mandy Hawes, PODER leader Antonio Diaz, long-time Center for Third World Organizing director Francis Calpotura, brilliant legal strategist Richard

Toshiyuki Drury of Communities for a Better Environment, Chinatown defender Gordon Mar, Greenaction founder and perennial rabble-rouser Bradley Angel, and Hunter's Point stalwart Olin Webb among the dozens of potential interviewees. We look forward to reading their stories, here, too.

Luke W. Cole  
Director,  
Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment,  
California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation

San Francisco, California  
November 2002

## INTERVIEW HISTORY by Carl Wilmsen

Robert Bullard's writings on environmental justice piqued my interest immediately when I first became acquainted with them in the mid-1990s. At that time I was researching the conflict over the use and management of a sustained yield unit on the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico for my dissertation in geography. The parallels between communities of color around the United States which bear a disproportionate risk of exposure to hazardous substances and the Hispano communities adjacent to the sustained yield unit which have not shared equally in the benefits of the unit's management struck me as resulting from the same broad political, economic, and social processes. As it happened, Carl Anthony's career touched on the sustained yield unit as the conflict there spread to the board room of Earth Island Institute. At issue were conflicting advertisements taken out in national newspapers by separate members of the Earth Island organization. One advertisement supported the efforts of Hispano community members in New Mexico to pursue land-based livelihoods that included logging, and the other advertisement endorsed a hard-line "zero-cut" approach to management of the nation's national forests. Efforts to reconcile this contradiction ultimately led to Mr. Anthony and his Urban Habitat Program separating from Earth Island Institute.

While I knew that these events had occurred, it was not until the late 1990s that I actually met Carl Anthony. After completing my dissertation in New Mexico I began working at ROHO conducting oral histories in the environment and natural resources project area. My initial work focused on leaders of mainstream environmental groups, particularly the Sierra Club. Yet, the work of mainstream environmental groups and environmental justice (EJ) organizations diverges in many significant ways. As a result, although mainstream and EJ groups occasionally work together on specific projects, they often have difficulty forging lasting coalitions. Wanting to understand the foundations of these differences, I began exploring ways to develop an oral history project on EJ leaders in the San Francisco Bay Area. At the same time, I could not help but notice that the ROHO environmental collection did not include oral histories of EJ leaders, nor of many other environmental leaders outside of the mainstream environmental movement. The oral histories in this series thus are the result of an effort to diversify ROHO's collection, as well as to collect the stories and insights of people with unique and important perspectives on the environment and the human relationship to it.

I began the project by contacting Carl Anthony. With his many connections and broad experience in the Environmental Justice Movement, he seemed like a natural person with whom to start. He agreed immediately to participate, and also provided me with the names of several other EJ leaders to consider interviewing. Despite his very busy schedule, Mr. Anthony set aside three consecutive Thursday afternoons in July and August of 1999 to meet with me. We met in his office at the Urban Habitat Program in the Presidio in San Francisco and conducted interviews of about two hours each.

Henry Clark was next. After agreeing to be interviewed, Dr. Clark graciously gave me access to the files of newspaper clippings he has kept over the years of stories about the West County Toxics Coalition's activities. In addition to providing me with my major source of information on the coalition prior to the interview, researching these files resulted in another fortuitous occurrence. While conducting research in these files at the coalition's office on McDonald Avenue in Richmond, I happened to meet Ms. Ahmadi Thomas. I gathered very quickly from our casual conversations that Ms. Thomas had been involved in social justice activism for many, many years, and that she too would be an important person to include in this oral history project. Thus, after conducting three two-hour interviews with Dr. Clark at the coalition's office during December of 1999, I returned a fourth time to interview Ms. Thomas.

Following these interviews I began research on the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition in preparation for interviewing Ted Smith. The SVTC has extensive files on all of its activities and Mr. Smith and the SVTC staff were very gracious and helpful in providing me access to them. One day in April, 2000, I made the two-hour BART and bus trip to San Jose to spend the day going through these files. I subsequently made four additional trips during which I would spend the morning reading through the files in a meeting room and would spend about two hours in the afternoon interviewing Mr. Smith in his office.

The final interview was with Pam Tau Lee. Since Ms. Lee works on the UC Berkeley campus, my commute consisted of a five minute walk from The Bancroft Library to the Labor Occupational Health program's offices on Fulton street. We conducted four interviews in her office, or in a small meeting room across the hall, during June, July, and August of 2000. Like the interviews with Mr. Anthony, Dr. Clark, Ms. Thomas, and Mr. Smith, we were undisturbed for the duration except for occasional telephone calls and short interruptions to attend to office business.

On August 1, 2000, I left ROHO for a position as coordinator of the Community Forestry Research Fellowship program in the College of Natural Resources at UC Berkeley. Assuming this position brought new responsibilities, and thus required that I complete the editing and processing of the oral histories of these EJ leaders in my spare time. This slowed down completion of the project considerably. Nevertheless, I worked on them as my time permitted, and finally, more than two years after conducting the last interview with Ms. Lee, the transcripts are now ready for deposit in the archives.

Like all transcripts of interviews conducted by ROHO, these are the product of the efforts of several individuals. The interview tapes were transcribed by ROHO staff, after which I edited them to assure that the meanings of the spoken words were not lost in their translation to written text. Despite their busy schedules, Mr. Anthony, Dr. Clark, Ms. Thomas, Mr. Smith, and Ms. Lee then further edited the transcripts to make sure that I had not mangled their intended meaning as well as to clarify or add more detail to any topics they felt were in need of such adjustment.

The resulting texts tell the stories of five remarkable individuals and how the paths they chose to follow in life have led them to careers in the Environmental Justice Movement. They tell of how these individuals have worked to overcome challenges, of how they have built networks of relationships in pursuit of a more just society, and how they have worked for precedent-setting policies and practices that have helped alleviate the environmental and social impacts of industrial processes. Above all, the transcripts bespeak the unwavering commitment of these individuals to social justice and to making the world a better place for all of humanity.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Carl Wilmsen  
Interviewer/Editor

Albany, California  
December, 2002



Regional Oral History Office  
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Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Pamela Tau Lee

Date of birth February 16, 1948 Birthplace San Francisco, CA, USA

Father's full name John Tau

Occupation Design engineer Birthplace Fresno, CA, USA

Mother's full name Mignon Tau

Occupation State civil servant Birthplace Fresno, CA, USA

Your spouse Fay Ben Lee

Occupation Insurance Birthplace Toishan, China

Your children Dennis Lee

Where did you grow up? San Francisco, CA

Present community San Francisco

Education B. S. Sociology

Occupation(s) Labor and health educator (workers, unions, community)

Special projects - Joint labor and management facilitation, Participatory

Action Research Coordinator. Previous work - union organizer, Communi

organizer, Various jobs in hotel industry.

Areas of expertise Environmental justice, popular education,

Social change activist, work with diverse populations - ethnic

race, youth, women.

Other interests or activities Sports events especially baseball,

hiking and walking, quilting, enjoying family, friends + pet.

Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Southwest  
Organizations in which you are active Network for Environmental & Economic Justice,  
Alliance for Just Transition, Asian Pacific Labor Alliance, American Public Health As  
American Federation of Teachers, University College Labor Educators Association

SIGNATURE Pamela Tau Lee

DATE: August 17, 2000



## INTERVIEW WITH PAMELA TAU LEE

Family Background: Parents and Grandparents

[Interview 1: June 2, 2000] ##<sup>1</sup>

Wilmsen: Today is June 2, 2000, and this is the first interview with Pamela Tau Lee. Okay, I want to start at the very beginning. When and where were you born and where did you grow up?

Lee: I was born 1948, February 16, in San Francisco, and I grew up there. I haven't left San Francisco, I have always been there, except for a two-year stint in Hayward, and Oakland for a little bit.

Wilmsen: When you were in college?

Lee: Yes. So that was thirty-two years ago.

Wilmsen: So you've always lived in San Francisco?

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Lee: I have one sister, who is eight years younger than I, and she now lives in Prunedale, California.

Wilmsen: What did your parents do for a living while you were growing up?

---

<sup>1</sup>## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Lee: My parents were also born here, in Fresno, California, seventy-five years ago. As I was growing up, my mother was part of the war effort when women were needed in the factories and was recruited by Bethlehem Steel, to work there, and later she became a draftswoman. My father, when I was born, had just been released from the army, and he began work in the electronics industry as a stock boy, and then moved up to become an engineer by the time he retired.

Wilmsen: They were both born in Fresno?

Lee: Yes, in Fresno, California.

Wilmsen: So Bethlehem Steel where your mother worked, that was in--

Lee: San Francisco.

Wilmsen: Oh, in San Francisco.

Lee: Yes, the shipyards. The war effort needed women to be in the shipyards.

Wilmsen: And then that's how your father ended up in San Francisco, also?

Lee: My father and mother were born a year apart and one block away from each other in Fresno. They came up for different reasons. They didn't know each other until they met in San Francisco as adults.

My father's family were flower growers and they came up to grow flowers along the Peninsula, from Millbrae down to San Carlos, growing asters and chrysanthemums. My grandparents were farmers. For a while they lived in San Francisco Chinatown, but caught the train south every day to work in the fields. So my father came up because his parents found work as farmers.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. Did they own the land, or did they lease it?

Lee: At that time Chinese couldn't own land.

Wilmsen: Okay, so that was pre-war.

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: And do you know what kind of arrangement they had for farming? Was it sharecropping or leasing?

Lee: They leased the land. It was hard to own land because Chinese couldn't own land, so since they had to lease, and the crop that worked best and was in demand was asters and chrysanthemums and you cannot grow these flowers on land right after each other--you have to move the crop--so leasing kind of fell into place that way.

Wilmsen: Did you work on the farm as a girl?

Lee: I was a spoiled little granddaughter. I went down to the farms, never had to work. But I would imitate my grandmother who pinched the leaves off the stem of the flower to make the blossom large. She was responsible for the beautiful large blossoms. I would try to imitate her. My summers with Grandma are very special memories.

Wilmsen: Did she appreciate your efforts?

Lee: Oh, she adored me. [laughter] I could have killed the flowers and it would have been fine.

Wilmsen: Now, you mentioned when we spoke on the phone once that you're third generation. So your grandparents were born in China?

Lee: Yes, but I think one grandfather was born here. My mother's side.

Wilmsen: Can you briefly sum up your grandparents' experience and how they ended up coming to America?

Lee: Sure. On one side I know more than the other side. On my father's side they were--in the twenties in southern China it was a very difficult period: a lot of poverty; they had drought; there was a lot of political turmoil in that period of time, so my grandfather needed to provide for the family. My father is one of, I think, three brothers--and my grandfather, being a farmer, came over here to seek a better life. When he came to Chinatown, Grandfather made connections with people he knew back from the village, and then began, you know, the journey on the farm growing flowers. He would send money back to my two uncles. My father never met his last living brother until he was sixty-something and went to China as part of a tour group of engineers.

My grandmother was pregnant with my father on the boat on the way to America. So that is--for many of the people in the 1920s, who came here--a very typical story, being forced from your country because of political and social difficulties. But it must have been particularly difficult for her, morning sickness and all.

Wilmsen: Who took care of your uncles in China?

Lee: My uncles by that time were teenagers.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Lee: And so I suppose they went to live with other people in the family. But yes, they might have been pretty self-reliant. And when I went back to visit my last living uncle, for the first and only time, back in the eighties, he was very old by then, but I came to learn that the two brothers became very politically involved and were revolutionaries. And I think my grandfather knew that.

Wilmsen: Revolutionaries?

Lee: In the Chinese Revolution. But my father never knew that part of them when he was growing up.

Wilmsen: Sounds like there's some interesting stories there.

Lee: Probably.

Wilmsen: Probably. [laughter] Did your grandparents come through Angel Island?

Lee: I have to look that up, but I think that they did. I think everybody did. And I will probably be looking that up and talking to others. What I do know is that when he came, he joined the various Chinese organizations--the tongs and the family associations--got very involved in a lot of that. It was very popular.

On my mother's side, I'm not that familiar, but my grandfather apparently was here. My great-grandfather on my mother's side might have worked on the Panama Canal. And my grandfather worked with my great-grandfather in Fresno.

They had a restaurant--Chinese restaurant--that served very delicious Chinese noodles. Apparently it was a very popular restaurant because it was one of the only places they could get fresh noodles. They worked there for many years.

I remember my grandfather as being quite different a person in terms of the community. He was very Americanized. On my mother's side they're very Americanized.

Wilmsen: Okay, so that was the grandfather that was born here?

Lee: Yes, I think so. His sister--one of his sisters--is written up<sup>1</sup>, and her story is housed in the Hoover Institute. It's a very interesting side of my family that really I think we can talk more about later.

### Early Years in San Francisco's Chinatown

Wilmsen: Okay. What were some of the most important influences on you while you were growing up?

Lee: I was born in San Francisco Chinatown--my parents were living, I'd say, on the edge of Chinatown at that time in 1948. It's now called Russian Hill.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: But I would go down to Chinatown to be with my grandparents. They lived right in the heart, at 46 Waverly Place. It's an alley that's parallel to Grant Avenue in San Francisco Chinatown. I remember going there--I have many memories--looking out the window over Grant Avenue, and just feeling that that was me. That was me as a young child, looking out and watching people going up and down, buying groceries, going to work, going to visit friends.

Grant Avenue at that time was a two-way street. There was a Chinese newspaper office across the street. They had a ticker tape machine in the window, so I would spend many hours just watching that typewriter spill out stories that would go into the Chinese press. So that being there in my developing years, and going with my grandmother shopping and going to visit people and going to the back alleys and placing bets on different games [laughs] that the Chinese would be playing, hoping that their lucky number will come up.

Wilmsen: Were they like lotteries?

Lee: Yes, like a lottery. She would have me, every morning, pick a picture that was on this big poster, and then she would go and place the bet on whatever that picture was. These pictures were like these lunar characters.

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<sup>1</sup>Judy Yung, "Flora Belle Jan, Flapper and Writer," in *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. The zodiac.

Lee: Yes, like the zodiac. Hoping for good luck and some fortune was just part of my life. The other thing that I remember was that there were certain times of the month that I had to be very, very good and very, very quiet, and that the apartment would become very, very dark. Grandma would pull all the shades down. She would lock the doors, and then there would be this very wonderful smell--aroma--and as I grew up I came to learn that she was making rice whiskey. [laughter]

Wilmsen: Oh!

Lee: And that's how Grandma supplemented her garment factory salary: she made very, very good whiskey, for medicinal purposes of course. [laughter] But I had to be very quiet, and, "Don't answer the doors, when Grandma closes the shades." So that made an impression on me, too.

But being around my grandmother and in Chinatown laid a strong foundation for me for the rest of my life. Then when I was seven, we moved out of Chinatown. My family--my father and mother had saved enough money to put a down payment on a house. At that time it was just when the real estate industry was letting Chinese buy homes. In San Francisco during that time, in the deeds it says very clearly you cannot sell to Chinese or Jewish people. And during the fifties was when that started to open up, and we moved to a neighborhood called Glen Park.

So I was the only Chinese in the school, and it was a very big change for me, because before that I had gone to an all-Chinese school. It was named Commodore Stockton.

Wilmsen: What language did they use?

Lee: English.

Wilmsen: They used English?

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: Did you speak English at home, too?

Lee: Yes. I could understand my grandmother, who would speak Chinese. My grandfather spoke to me in English. But then, you know, mainly I could understand, but I didn't speak. I didn't have to go to Chinese school. And I think it's because my parents were born here. And at that time, it was this whole concept of assimilation.

So when I moved out of Chinatown, it was very difficult. It wasn't ugly, it wasn't real painful, but it was a big change. I was kind of--well, I was lonely, yes. And during that time, you know, the assimilation thing--I mean, I remember the teacher drawing a pot, and talking about all the different nationalities being a melting pot. So whenever I would ride the bus, from that neighborhood to Chinatown--once or twice I rode with my grandmother and she talked to me in Chinese, I remember feeling very embarrassed.

But that period of time I was also learning life lessons from my parents and my uncles, but I was getting different messages. At school it was this melting pot message. At home, my mother and uncle kind of said the same type of thing: "Don't rock the boat. Because you're Chinese, you have to work harder. You will always have to be better. Not that you are superior to anybody, but you have to be better, you have to work harder, because that's the way this country is for Chinese people." And my uncle kind of impressed on me to don't be caught off-guard if I'm not accepted, because I will not be accepted. I will always be different and I will never be fully accepted, so, "Accommodate yourself to that."

### **Father's Childhood, and the Melting Pot**

Lee:

On the other hand I have my father, who I think because my father and my mother were born here and I didn't go to Chinese school, my dad grew up on the farms--so there were no Chinese there, either. I mean, my dad didn't grow up there, he grew up in Chinatown, but then he had gone down to the Peninsula, so he was around a lot of white families and white people.

There was a tension on him in terms of--I believe he was very, very lonely. He was the only boy. He had to take care of himself. Grandma and Grandfather were never home, so he just had to dress himself, go downstairs. The basement restaurant had gotten money from my grandparents, so when he came down, they would feed him. Then he would go on his own to go to school. Then he has to get home, he gets fed by the restaurant, he goes upstairs, and he goes to sleep. He was by himself, no friends. So it was a difficult childhood for my father.

He had pressures and things. He, I think, wanted to really leave Chinatown, he did not identify with being Chinese. He didn't follow my grandfather around from meeting to meeting. So he didn't have the same thing as I did. So the tension was strong, I think, for him.

He was also mentored by a white school counselor when he was in high school. And I think that mentoring had a big influence on him, and so my father would--

Wilmsen: Do you know the counselor's name?

Lee: It was Mr. Cherry.

Wilmsen: Okay. What's your father's name, by the way?

Lee: John Tau--T-A-U. Tau is our paper name. Our real name is Lee. So that's a whole story, too, of who are you, and about being Chinese: it's like, [laughs] "So what's your name, and is that your real family name, or is that your paper name?" So Tau is our paper name.

Wilmsen: Paper name, meaning--?

Lee: We're paper angels, meaning that you buy the name when you're in China. When you come here, the name that you've bought is your name. But our real family name is Lee. So when we do some historical research on Angel Island, you'll understand about paper angels.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: During the twenties, that happened a lot because of the earthquake in 1906.

Wilmsen: When the records burned.

Lee: When the records burned.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: So anyway, my father, you know, he was very Americanized and he speaks very good English. He also prides himself on his ability to write very well. He can speak some German, he can speak a little Russian, he listens to Dixieland, opera--

Wilmsen: How did he learn those--German and Russian?

Lee: Oh, just people that he kind of met along his life. He was going to work with this Russian fellow, so they'd ride down everyday to work and they'd speak Russian. He'd teach him Russian. So my father when he was growing up, very troubled, got kicked out of San Francisco's Galileo High School. Troubled, unruly, mischievous, but this principal really

helped him and helped him focus. And then he went to night school and he ended up coming here to UC Berkeley. [See Appendix for comments by John Tau.]

So for me: is that melting pot thing really true? And then you know, my uncle and my mom sending me other messages. Then, the embarrassment that I felt when I'm riding the bus and somebody speaks Chinese, or somebody would come up and start mocking me, you know, "Ching-chong," you know. Oh, it happened all the time riding on the bus to me, going to and from school, all the time. So you're ashamed, you know? So there's that.

And then when you get to Chinatown, when I was younger, that was me. I was very, very comfortable. I went to the garment factories with my grandmother, played there. But then after a while, after being away, then I got ashamed there, too. Because when I would go shopping, the shopkeepers would call me--the literal meaning is--they would say, "You are shy," but the slang for being called shy is very derogatory, meaning that you're a piece of doo-doo. [laughs] You know, you're nothing but a piece of doo-doo, you think you're above it all. But they would say, "You're *bao xi*, you're full of doo-doo." So it would embarrass me and humiliate me, so as I was growing up I wasn't comfortable there, either, because I couldn't speak the language. So I would be so ashamed, I would stand outside the stores and wait for my grandmother or mother to finish her shopping.

Before I would be able to go inside the store, they'd give me a piece of barbecued pork; they'd give me paper so I could draw; I could sit on their lap and draw at the counter while my grandmother would get groceries. But then as I was getting older, I would be uncomfortable. One, is because you're getting older, you can't sit on their lap anymore. But I didn't feel comfortable being Chinese. And it was hard. I wasn't comfortable anywhere.

Wilmsen: And about how old were you then, when you started feeling that way?

Lee: Oh, I think I was around eight, nine, ten. Yes, so that was a big significant time.

### Adlai versus Ike

Lee: Then another time, I think, when I became aware of things was the Eisenhower-Stevenson election. When was that?

Wilmsen: '52?

Lee: No. Later, was it?

Wilmsen: It wouldn't have been '52 because you were four.

Lee: Yes, I would have been four. So it was '55. We'll have to look that up, but I just remember growing up and my dad always telling me, "We're with Adlai. We like Adlai." And I said, "Okay." Then he would explain why I should like Adlai. So, "I really like Adlai because he has a hole in his shoe. That's because he's for poor people. That's why you like Adlai."

"Okay, I like Adlai."

So that put me in an awkward situation, because I liked Adlai, but the only other little girl that came to my school who was Chinese--her name was Frances--she liked Ike.

Wilmsen: Okay. [laughs]

Lee: And I liked Adlai. I didn't know why I liked Adlai, but my dad said it was because he had a hole in his shoe, and he liked poor people; he cared for poor people. My friend, childhood friend, was from Taiwan, and was from a privileged class. I didn't know that at that time, but I just knew that her mother didn't really approve of me--wasn't very friendly to me when I would go visit.

They were very, very smart. I was not very smart. But I was in the gifted track. At that time there was tracking. So I was in the track that you knew you were gifted. But I wasn't that gifted--[laughs]--compared to this other girl!

So that was another big thing for me, was to understand that she liked Ike. She had money, and they were kind of snobby, and they didn't really care for me, and that on my side, we had another view. That was another big thing that made an impression on me. And that kind of held with me for life, too. [laughter] It's funny how these things happen.

Wilmsen: Anything else you can remember?

Lee: Well, then you get older. I don't know how detailed now you want to get into it, but I guess the other significant, real significant time--you know, some people would say Kennedy [Kennedy's assassination]. I remember that, and I remember where I was in high school, but it wasn't that. At that time I was not really aware of things.

Wilmsen: Well, most people aren't at that age.

Lee: Yes, but in college, probably the next period--'68, '69, '70. Yes. I was finishing college, maybe in the middle of college, probably a junior. I was at Cal State Hayward at that time, because they were supposed to soon be accredited to be a librarian school, but they never got it.

Wilmsen: Actually, before we get into that--I do want to talk about that, but I just had a couple more questions--

Lee: Before we leap to college!

### Social Problems in Chinatown

Wilmsen: Before we leap to college, yes. What I've read about San Francisco's Chinatown is how crowded it was--

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: --and I was wondering if that was your experience as well.

Lee: When I was growing up, it looked different from the way it looks now. At that time, all of Grant Avenue had regular kinds of stores. You would buy groceries on Grant Avenue, and people from certain regions--if they were from Toisan, they would go to this grocery store and that herb store. If whoever's shopping is from Jungsan, they would go to this other grocery store, and shop at another herb store.

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Lee: There were places to get your shoes repaired, you'd buy your clothes, there was a five and ten cents store, a hardware store, post office, the Chinese Telephone Company was there. So it's nothing like today, where it's a tourist thing.

And at that time you could drive your car both ways on Grant Avenue. So it was crowded, but not like today. But still, there was a lot of tuberculosis. My dad had tuberculosis. I could not take a skin test because I had a shadow. And that's because of, you know, the crowded conditions you live in. The size of my office right here is the size of the apartments that you can have a whole family living in. And how they would accommodate you is you would build a loft and so they would have a ladder and the beds would be up there. Then down here would be the sofa and a table where you could eat.

Then maybe you would have a hot pan--a hot plate--but if you wanted to really cook regular, over fire, you'd go to the communal kitchen. And communal bathrooms were down the hall. So it was a lot of tuberculosis, and was very crowded.

There was only one park. There was no play area. And a lot of suicides. Our family didn't, you know, but there were a lot of very unhappy people. High suicide rates. A lot of mahjong. You could hear crinkling in every building, the tiles going back and forth. There were people who were alcoholics, and people who were drugged out on opium, and you're all in the same building together.

Wilmsen: So you were aware of that as a girl?

Lee: You could tell that there's something odd.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: Yes, you could tell. Now, the mahjong, you know, you could hear it all the time, so my grandmothers instilled in me, you know, "You stay away from that. Don't you ever, ever, ever learn that game. It will poison you, it will kill you, it will destroy you." So to this day I cannot play. I have not a clue.

Wilmsen: Is that because people were gambling? Is that why she objected?

Lee: Yes, and women were neglecting their families.

The other big thing I guess in my life was being with my grandmother in the garment factories. And my grandmother could instill the fear. [laughs] So like that one story, today I don't touch mahjong tiles. [interruption for telephone call] Yes, the garment factories. There was a boss who would walk around and yell at all the ladies. She really hated him. But I could watch my grandmother work him. She was very, very good. She was very, very smart. That's why she got the best job. She was very, very good. But so she taught me how to kind of--not politics, but yes, she was very good. She'd say, "Now, you watch him. Don't you ever be like him. And the reason why he's like that, is because he had too much soy sauce in his food!" [laughter] So there were two things: one is, "Don't put too much soy sauce in your food or you'll be like him, and you'll be ugly like him," and, "Don't act like him! He's an evil man." He was. He was mad, he was mad. He was so mean to the ladies. In garment factories you had to work really hard, you couldn't go to the bathroom. All the same things that you hear today, forty years later, has not changed.

Wilmsen: Was he Chinese or white?

Lee: He was Chinese. Yes.

### Atheism, Schooling, and Music

Wilmsen: Was religion an important part of your upbringing?

Lee: No. My mother went to a little bit of church and that's because my grandmother said, "Well, we're here in America and they all go to church. These American people, these white people, they go to church, so you should go to church. I don't know why, but you should go." [laughter] My father, on the other hand, would not let me read the Bible. He wouldn't let me learn any of that. I think he thought it was hypocritical. He says, "We're atheists." Okay. And the other thing that we do practice is, you know, the various Chinese--not real deep, not orthodox, but we go through the various Chinese rituals to our ancestors.

Wilmsen: Okay. And what were your kind of academic interests along more--well, not just academic, but interests in sports or anything like that?

Lee: Yes, well, as a girl, because I was girl, to my sister and I, my father mainly said, "Learn how to type. You got to learn how to type." Because at that time, you know, the best that he could hope for me was I was going to be a secretary. I wanted to be an artist, I wanted to be a singer, a dancer, an artist. But that was foolish work, was not--

You know, I wanted to do that because at that time, *The Flower Drum Song* was popular, and my dad would take me to see *Oklahoma*, *The King and I*, all of these wonderful things. And I knew the words backwards and forwards, I could dance all of those things. That's what I wanted to do. I was a very free spirit, but nagging at me was, "You know, you're Chinese, you're not going to--Chinese can't do that." That's only two people, and the other person isn't even Chinese, she's Japanese. Nancy Kwan is the only Chinese one there. And it's a very unhappy life, don't even bother.

So it was just to go to school--not to excel. I was never pushed like the other Chinese were pushed, mainly by their immigrant parents. My parents were born here, so I was not pushed to do well academically, but neither was I helped on any of my homework. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. I had to do it all on my own. Like I said, I was not a very good student. I was never really encouraged. And in fact, I was most of the time in shame because, like I said--one experience kind of helps picture it:

I was at a grocery store in our neighborhood, Glen Park, and there was a Chinese butcher there. He was, like, the only Chinese out there. He, I think, was very similar to my friend's parents: "You have to be superior. You have to be very, very smart." And he could see in me that I was not like that. I didn't care about that kind of stuff. So he would pick on me a lot. And one time he said, "Spell..." He gave me a word. "Spell it!" I was scared and I spelled it, and I spelled it wrong. And he says, "You're not Chinese. You spelled it wrong. You can't even spell that word." And it was very shameful. So ever since--today I can't spell. I can't spell worth the beans. Thank goodness for spellcheck! [laughter]

But it just made an impact on me. He said, "You're not Chinese." It just really reinforced that there was something wrong with me, and I'm not very smart.

Then the fact that my parents would say--I know that my mom knew that I wanted to be an artist, and I loved to draw. But you know, "You're going to be a secretary. That's safe, and that's what you'll be."

So academically, I was in that track. I went to Lowell [High School]. I got accepted to Lowell. I have not a clue as to how that happened, but I got into Lowell. You know about Lowell?

Wilmsen: No, I'm not from this area.

Lee: All right. Lowell, people die to get into Lowell. It's one of these contested civil rights cases, and it's very, very hot in the community now around the issue of education. It's a preparatory school, and people from across the city apply. Very, very high standards. And people have this whole thing about being able to be a Lowell graduate, to have sent your child to Lowell, so now there are [law]suits because Chinese--there's a quota type--not quite a quota, but many Chinese have filed suit because there's too many Chinese there and they want to get in, and it's just ugly. Ugly.

Well, anyway, I got into that school. But when I was there, most of the kids from my neighborhood, oh, we did terrible. We were just the C's and the D's and we had a hard time that first year. We just did not have the same kind of skills as the people from the rest of the city. There were mainly rich kids there. The school was mainly white, too, at the time. So that was me, academically, as kind of reinforcing: "Well, you don't have that much upstairs." [laughter] "But people like you. You get along." But that's me.

Wilmsen: Was music much of an influence on you?

Lee: I never learned how to play an instrument, but I was around a lot of different kinds of music because of my dad. He liked Dixieland, modern, jazz, opera. I went to opera, I went to musicals, I would go to the symphony. And then I was forbidden to listen to rock and roll. So a lot of my friends, they can name all of these rock and roll songs, I can't. I don't know. I don't know because I was not allowed to read the comics, never bought a funny book. Remember those comic books?

Wilmsen: Oh, sure.

Lee: My friends would have stacks and stacks. Maybe I had one or two. And rock and roll music, no.

Wilmsen: What was your parents' objection to rock and roll?

Lee: It was not music. I mean, I could never play it. If I wanted to hear it, I had my own radio so I could go to my own room and turn and listen to Gene Nelson in the morning. I could wake up to Gene Nelson in the morning and KSFO. That was it. That music was not allowed in the living room, in the kitchen. It was my dad had control over that.

Wilmsen: I see. Okay.

Lee: So you know, *Aida*, yes. Puccini--[laughter]--all of that, yes. Very unusual, because the only other Chinese kid that I grew up with didn't know anything about that stuff, which made me feel even more weird.

### Getting Involved in the Third World Liberation Front

Wilmsen: Okay, shall we leap into college now?

Lee: Yes. I keep remembering these other things, but--

Wilmsen: Well, go ahead, if there's more.

Lee: No.

Wilmsen: Okay. [laughs] So you went to college at Cal State Hayward?

Lee: Yes, I was at City College in San Francisco first--a community college. That was where a lot of people normally went. People like me academically at Lowell, they would go to City College, because you couldn't really afford to go straight into a four-year college, except for the rich people that I knew who went to Stanford and Berkeley, who transferred down there. I got accepted to [San Francisco] State, but I didn't want to tell my parents because I wanted to move out, and if I went to State I would have to stay home.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Lee: So they'll read this and then they'll know [laughter] I kept information from them. During that time when I was there, '69, that's when the Third World Liberation Front was in full gear at Berkeley; and preceding that, the whole Free Speech Movement and everything on campus. But the Civil Rights Movement and everything just kind of came together at that time and just shook my world upside down.

Wilmsen: How did it do that?

Lee: Well, I can remember the exact incident. I was sitting in a meeting. It was my first meeting. I'd just got on the campus and I saw that there was an Ori-Occi Club. It was an Oriental club. That's what we called ourselves then.

Wilmsen: Ori-Occi?

Lee: Ori-Occi, like Oriental-Occidental. Very, very strange. And it was the Ori-Occi Club. So I went in there and it was a room full of Chinese, mainly, maybe some Japanese Americans too. And these were the kind of people that were like how I told you my friend, my childhood friend was. The "I like Ike" type of people were there, so I was uncomfortable. Very cliquish group.

Now I know why people were cliquish, because it was a way of protecting each other, being safe. But at that time I didn't know. I'd always been on the outside.

So I was sitting there, and I'm just listening to them talking about who they're going to run for Miss Chinatown, and it wasn't going to be me! [laughter] One, they didn't know me, and I wasn't a looker. But they had this thing about how they were going to raise money, sell fortune cookies, do different things, run so-and-so for Miss Chinatown. Then this: "And now we have a speaker from UC Berkeley." Okay, so this woman goes up there and does a presentation. That's where everybody else's eyes glazed over, but I was very interested. Here was somebody that sort of looked like me, and she was up there talking. She wasn't dressed fancy like these other people. Not that we weren't dressed

nice, but they were, like, you know, very good clothes. So her name was Jean Quan. She is currently on the school board in Oakland, Jean Quan.

Wilmsen: Oh.

Lee: But Jean was a student. She was talking about what was happening here at Berkeley and she said, "You know, I don't know who here came from Chinatown, from the community." She'd always say "the community." And I came from the community, I mean, early--so I was listening. She was talking about Chinatown. She said, "What we're doing is we're creating a movement to go back to Chinatown to help our people." And that all resonated with me. It didn't resonate with the other folks, but it really resonated with me!

You know, "Our people are working in garment factories; our people are getting sick; our people don't have decent wages; our people, you know, are experiencing racism."

Oh, the "R" word, that was a word that just sent chills up my spine. Oh, that's awful. Oh, I don't like that word. That was scary. That word was totally scary to me.

But the other things that she said resonated with me: she said, "So, I'd like people to think about coming to the community and volunteering." She passed around a list, so I signed my name and this other guy sitting next to me signed his name, and about a week and a half later we got a call--I got a call: "We need your help. Come to San Francisco."

"What do you want me to do?"

"We want you to answer phones. Just answer phones and help us do that."

"Oh, okay." And so you know, I said, "Well, I'll be there next Thursday."

I went up there, and I was walking down the street, just kind of, you know, here I'm in college and I'm independent and my parents don't know I'm here. I'm here in the same city as them, and I didn't call them. I didn't tell them. I'm here on my own. [laughs] I'm doing something and I didn't ask anybody for permission.

And I go in there. It was to answer phones for a group called the Asian Legal Services. That was at one table. So I was at the Asian Legal Service table. It looked just like this, like this table--metal table. And that's because the metal table came from UC Berkeley! [laughter] That's because the Department of Ethnic Studies paid for the table, paid for the chairs, paid for the phones, because that was this big fight, you know, to have people go to the community and the university should offer that kind of education so that people can help their people, and we can learn about our history and stuff.

Then across the way was Draft Help, another organization. That was during the war, so people were coming down and getting assistance regarding the military draft--legal assistance regarding the draft, understanding their rights. And if they didn't want to join the army, they didn't want to be drafted, how they could apply for conscientious objector. This is all in--how old are you? [laughs]

Wilmsen: Forty-three.

Lee: Okay, so you understand.

Wilmsen: I was young, but I remember those days.

Lee: Then there was in the back room a group called the Red Guards. They were back there having a meeting. I just knew that they were back there--didn't know what they looked like, nothing like that, because I was just told: "So-and-so, they want the Red Guard, they're busy, so take a message."

"Okay." [laughter] Here I am, I looked weird: I'm wearing college campus clothes, and everybody else was walking around in green combat jackets, field jackets, and wearing berets and dark sunglasses and looking very different. The girls and the guys. You know, me with my long hair, and coming up from campus. [laughs]

And a friend of mine knew I was coming down, and he lived up the street on Nob Hill and he came down to sit with me. He kept telling me, "Don't stay here! Leave! Go home! You don't want to stay here. This is bad. You know, I really don't want you to be here. I care for you a lot." You know, and we're just friends. "I care for you. Don't be around here."

Just when he was finishing lecturing me, these guys from that back office, the Red Guard's office, came flying out! Ran past me down the hall, down the street, Kearny Street, and turned onto Jackson Street. So everybody ran after them, including me. We ran down there, and when I got down there, this guy who was a Red Guard just finished beating up somebody and crushed his glasses.

This was in what was called the basement of the I-Hotel, International Hotel, and the particular storefront we were in was the Hungry I. It used to be the old Hungry I--a lot of comedians and singers used to be there. But now it had been converted into the Chinatown Youth Council offices.

Wilmsen: That's where you were answering phones, or that's where they ran to?

Lee: They ran to.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: They ran around the corner and went down these stairs that led to the Chinatown Youth Council, and I saw them beating up this guy. The Red Guard guy was standing over him, "I don't ever want to see your face here. I don't like what you're doing, and how you're portraying our people. These young people should not be saying these racist things." So I find out that this guy, Alex Hing, had just beaten up a writer named Frank Chin.

Wilmsen: Oh.

Lee: Frank Chin had written this play called *Chicken Coop Chinaman* and he was producing the play and he was having young people from the community do parts of this play. And the Red Guard felt that it was denigrating to the Chinese community. He was making fun, and Alex felt, at that time, that Frank Chin did not have pride in being Chinese, he was embarrassed at being Chinese.

That debate is still going on about Frank Chin. [laughs] But that was the first time, I think, you know, Frank got the message. And he didn't change. I mean, I think he was beaten up several times after that--in those literary articles and everything--him and Amy Tan, now, whoosh [making sound to indicate conflict between Frank Chin and Amy Tan]! Maxine Hong Kingston--they have these dialogues about that.

But that was another big event in my life, was to see that. And Frank got up and picked up his broken glasses, and they debated, and the Red Guard told him, "We want you out of here. Get off this block." And I think Frank left.

But then I was to meet Frank several times over the years. You know, we became friends. But, I was shaking. And here, you know, violence: there was blood; there was broken glass. [laughs]

There were other people who witnessed the "incident" who were there from UC Berkeley, from the Asian Studies here. They asked me, "Oh, who are you?"

"Oh, I volunteer--I was asked to come."

"Oh, Jean asked you? Oh, okay. Are you okay? No? Well, we'll drive you home."

So coming across the bridge--they were students here: a guy named Harvey Dong, and Steve Wong. If you look their names up in Ethnic Studies, you'll be able to track them

down. But I think they're the ones--I don't remember for sure, but I think they're the ones who drove me home and helped me understand, you know, what we're up against, and talked to me about pride and about racism in America.

At that time, I cringed when I heard the word racism. That doesn't have anything to do with me! And it's an ugly word, and so they really helped me understand what we were up against is not a tea party. It's something very powerful, and you have to be equipped to be able to tackle it, and sometimes it would be violent. So that was very, very odd for me. But it was bringing a lot of that stuff that I remember seeing on TV: the Watts riot, Martin Luther King, all of that. It was like, Ooh, it's that stuff that was always on TV. Now it was like here, and I just saw it. That started me--I went back. That started--oh, many years; I haven't left. [laughs]

### **Finding an Identity**

Wilmsen: That sounds like it was a lot more than just anti-Vietnam War activism there.

Lee: Yes, more. It was, you know, being able to find your identity. That helped me. I tried to characterize how lost and how alone I felt and how displaced I felt. And it wasn't just me. It was, you know, like the woman that came to that campus meeting--it was her. And there were all these other people at the same time feeling the same way, and they were learning from each other and talking with each other.

So the Red Guards was a result of the community--young people in the community meeting with David Hillard, the Black Panthers. And one of the key people, who you can look up, and who is a very dear friend of mine, Richard Aioki. He was a leader. Richard Aioki was here on campus, '69, one of the main leaders of the Third World Liberation Front. He was a Panther, and he and the other Panthers came to Chinatown and had educated people about serving the people--you know, the ten-point program of the Panthers.

So at that time, when I was starting to come down, there were young people, Red Guards serving free breakfasts in Chinatown. Never, never heard of before. Poor people coming and standing in line and getting fed. Wow, that was a big deal, because at that time the infrastructure in Chinatown was called the Chinese Six Companies and your face to the outside world was always to show that we are okay.

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Lee: The Six Companies was that very strong institution in the community that was our representatives to the outside, to the white community. And it was very shameful if we were ever to talk about the poverty, the tuberculosis, the sadness, the suicides, the young children who felt alienated, because it was a reflection on them, that they weren't doing their job.

So here the Red Guards are serving free breakfasts, and grandmothers are bringing their children and they're coming and getting fed. They're talking about health care and having free checkups, you know, and people were signing up. They're talking about women and that women should not be beaten up by their husbands. That you have a right to divorce. People were signing up! It was incredible what that sparked in the community.

And it was because these Chinese young people were talking to black young people, and these black young people were also talking to Latino and Mexican young people, and they formed on campus here--the Third World Liberation Front. Now we use the term multicultural, but at that time, it was called Third World. So that was just so powerful, like opening a light, opening a door. You know, we had not a clue as to the potential for things to be so different.

And a lot of that came from here at UC Berkeley, where the young people said, "We need to know about our history and we need to know skills that will enable us to go back to our communities and make a difference."

So I was swept up in that. It was wonderful. And it was a sense of identity. Finally I'm feeling comfortable with myself and being with people that I really like and want to be with. You know, all the Adlai people. [laughter] They all turned out to be Adlai people. There were very few Ike people.

And also another dynamic was the crossing of cultures. You know, before that everybody was separate. You don't mingle. You don't associate with blacks, you don't associate with--you just associate with Chinese, or Asians, Asian Americans. And that was a cliquish scene. It was very competitive, very dog-eat-dog. I didn't like it. So here was something else, where people would see each other and they'd give each other the power shake, you know. And then hug. And look at each other and feel real warmth and camaraderie. Wow! That was great. That was wonderful. And that has not left me.

Today, I do work with the Indigenous Environmental Network, the Southwest Network. I go to Mexico and work with folks there. It takes you half an hour to say hello to everybody because everybody has to hug. And it takes you forty-five minutes to say good-bye to everybody because everybody's got to hug. You know, that's--you felt that

connection, solidarity, and compassion, care, making a change, and dealing with the ugly side of this society together. It was very powerful.

### **The Third World Liberation Front on the Berkeley Campus**

Wilmsen: So your activities were here on the Berkeley campus?

Lee: We came a lot to the Berkeley campus. You know, there were a lot of churches in the area. In fact, my husband, because he came here, it was during that whole period, too. He said, "You remember that church? There was an anti-war meeting in that church."

"Yes, I remember that one."

"And then up the street at the Y, there was that other great one that we planned for."

"Yes, the Asian Coalition at the Y. Yes! Remember that one?" So it was just outside of here, a lot of activity.

Wilmsen: Is that when you met your husband?

Lee: I met my husband when I was working in the community, yes. I didn't know him while he was on campus. We both just graduated when I came to know of him. But I didn't marry him until seven years later. I didn't even like him. [laughter] And he thought I was some sissy girl from the suburbs, [laughter] so he didn't like me either. But yes, we came from the same struggle and the same experience.

Wilmsen: Were there many faculty involved at Cal State Hayward or at Berkeley with your group?

Lee: Boy, that's an interesting one. During the time of '69 to '70, if you go back and look at the records, Ethnic Studies and Asian Studies was mainly student-driven, so the faculty was all students. The classes were all taught by students: people like Tsien Law, and Brian Fong, Carolyn Wong, Richard Aioki. It was student-driven. And you know, learning, uncovering the history of our people, learning about the concentration camps, going back and digging all of that up; that was all done initially on campus here by students.

Then for this to be able to survive, they had to start to look for professors, and that's when people like Ron[ald] Takaki and folks came on. Ling-chi Wang. But there was a big struggle because Ling-chi, who is my friend now--but at that time we were on opposite

sides, because at that time the professors, they wanted to be able to--they're thinking of their career, they're thinking of being able to have Ethnic Studies institutionalized within the university--lean more towards the history. Mainly more academic: "Okay, let's go dig up information about the Chinese gold miners and where and when and how many Chinese were up in Roseville, and you know, the Potato King, and the Japanese and the crops and everything."

We were like, "Hey, that's great. We're there, but that all has to serve a purpose. You have to give us the ability make change and raise hell in the community and hold this racist government accountable for the injustices that have happened and continue to happen today. We want to be able to go up in their face and fight with them, get arrested, do whatever it takes to change our community and make it better."

The academics didn't want to have anything to do with that.

Wilmsen: They didn't have tenure yet.

Lee: No. You look back on it now, you know, we really disliked each other. But it was a struggle that had to happen. And you know, now they got tenure. And they do good work, but at that time they didn't. And at that time we weren't interested in getting tenure. We wanted to make revolution. So you know, you look back, and yes, I think--I mean, we feel today that they could be doing more. They could be sending a lot more students, and requiring their classes to you know, be out there. They don't. But people like myself are often invited to classes and we try our best.

Wilmsen: How did the administration approach you guys?

Lee: It was a big battle. There's a lot of old archives. I have some things at home. I borrowed one of the originals for you, one of the first Third World Liberation Front newspapers. It has the proposal to the administration in it and it has in there the response by the administration. You know, basically: "We reject everything!" [laughter] "This is a high-interest institution and this kind of curriculum is not suitable, doesn't meet the standards." Because you know, they were mainly wanting to perpetuate the western European standard.

Wilmsen: Yes. Do you want to keep going?

Lee: Yes, I'm fine.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: Are you getting tired?

Wilmsen: No, but you said you probably didn't want to go for two hours.

Lee: Well, I get long-winded.

Wilmsen: Okay. Is there anything else about your campus activism that you want to add?

Lee: Oh, there's just so much. I think that that period of time, the seventies--1970-72--this country was rocking. I mean, you have--I don't know whether it was the same time, but the takeover of Alcatraz. You know, Chinese American young people were getting in their cars and going to Wounded Knee, you know, spending time with folks there. You know, going down to the Oakland Panther office, going there after the Oakland police had just shot up the Panther office, standing outside, sobbing. You know, hearing all the different Panthers getting killed in their beds. You know, the things in that period of just rebellion, and people standing up and being angry, angry, angry. And on the other hand, being able to convey a love and compassion I don't think has ever been matched since then, a caring.

But those years were incredible years. You could see that people can get along and work together, and you don't have to be fighting over crumbs. But then, sort of later in the seventies, when the government started throwing out these crumbs--you know, social service agencies and things like that--that you start to see people fighting with each other over nothing. But at that time, we had the whole world open to us and it was really great--very powerful. I'll probably keep referring to different times.

### Teaching and Taking Classes in the East Bay, 1970-1972

Wilmsen: Now, at Cal State Hayward you got a degree in science and sociology?

Lee: Sociology. That was the only place where all my interests kind of just--it wasn't deliberate. [laughs] It was like, "Wow, this interests me, that interests me." I totaled it up and then, "Well, it looks like sociology." [laughs] Because they didn't get the library accreditation program I wanted originally. And I was just into liberating my mind. So I graduated in that, never went to my graduation ceremonies. And then got accepted into Teacher Corps.

Wilmsen: In graduate school.

Lee: [nods head, yes]

Wilmsen: So what prompted you to go into secondary education?

Lee: Because the next thing if I was not going to be a librarian is I wanted to be a teacher. And there was Peace Corps at that time and then there was Teacher Corps.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Lee: And Peace Corps was a little bit too much for me. I wasn't sure--I was enjoying myself being here in the community, so when people told me about--I don't know how I learned about it. I think that guy that was sitting next me at that campus meeting--

Wilmsen: Oh, yes?

Lee: He became a very good friend of mine. I think he told me about this program.

Wilmsen: What was his name?

Lee: His name was Louie Lee. He became a professor at Cal State Hayward, very known for wearing skirts. Very unusual fellow. Then he taught at Merritt College, which at that time had a campus right down here on Martin Luther King Jr. Way in West Oakland, and that's where the Panthers were very, very active, on that particular campus. Well, the powers that be soon closed it down. To kind of disperse that whole effort, they shut that place down. But I think he's the person who told me about Teacher Corps and that you could work in the ghetto schools, and go through a kind of unique kind of program to get your certification, your certificate.

So remember now, I was very, very active in the community. I was volunteering, I was doing anti-war work. You know, I was volunteering for this and that, so getting my certificate wasn't the main thing in my life; it was making revolution. So I think I am three units away from having my certificate. Because what happened was the bombing of Haiphong Harbor. People were into learning about Malcolm X, and Ho Chi Minh. The month of May was always very, very active. I think the bombing was in May, too. So that particular year coincided with I think--another thing happened.

I was meeting with Superintendent [Marcus] Foster, who was the superintendent of the schools in Oakland at that time. I was getting permission to teach the Asian studies at Oakland Tech. Well, around this time, the Symbionese Liberation Army killed him.

Wilmsen: Oh.

Lee: They shot Dr. Foster. It kind of shook me up. [pause] It shook me up.

My program and stuff like that, everybody else was too afraid, but he was willing to talk about me starting an ethnic studies thing at Oakland Tech. And actually, I think I taught one class.

But the other thing that kind of shook me up in terms of the public schools was a Chinese youth stabbed and killed a black youth on campus, and the whole school rioted.

Wilmsen: In the Oakland schools?

Lee: Yes, this was Oakland Tech. And this kid somehow escaped and probably flew to Hong Kong. He has never been brought to justice.

But I remember that the racial tension on campus was very high, and I went to the funeral with this other counselor. She was Chinese, and the two of us were the only Chinese who went to the funeral. People were very kind to us. It was fine, but it really shook me up in terms of what was happening in terms of the racial tension, and I just felt my role as a teacher wasn't good enough. I wanted to do more. So I dropped out. You know, I didn't want to be locked into that.

Wilmsen: Why did you feel that being a teacher wasn't good enough?

Lee: At that time, you know, you could go out and say you're going to be making revolution. You think you're going to see it in your lifetime! [laughter] This is 1970, '71, and '72 now. A lot of things are happening globally, [laughs] so you really thought you were going to see something. You know, we did see the end of the Vietnam War.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: We marched. We sat in. We fought with the police. You know, in '75 we celebrated the end of the Vietnam War. And you know, I really believed it was because the people around the world and the United States stood up and said this was wrong. So that was like a reflection of how much power we thought--you know, people in small Third World countries were standing up to the imperialists, the British colonialists, I mean, you know, kicking them out! So hey! We really thought we were going to be able to make revolution, so being a teacher wasn't that interesting to me. [laughs] I don't know if I'm giving you the flavor.

Wilmsen: Sure, oh, yes!

Lee: In that context, yes, teaching six periods a day and then going home and doing homework. I don't know about that. I want to be out in the streets.

And besides which, I became like a sponsor of a group called BASU--Bay Area Student Union. I along with the high school youth--we opened a storefront in Oakland Chinatown and we had Berkeley High and Albany High and Oakland High and Oakland Tech. All the progressives, young youths, formed these student unions, and I was the sponsor that was in charge of them all being together. And most of my work with them wasn't in class. They came over to my house and a few slept in my house all night and talked. You know, we read stuff together and learned about politics, and went on marches together, and did community fairs, and wrote and put on plays for the community, and helped people. These kids were helping people. So that's what I wanted to do.

Wilmsen: So what did you do?

Lee: I left teaching and along with these youths we all went to Laney Junior College in Oakland. I went to Laney with them! [laughter] Then we raised hell at Laney, fighting for an ethnic studies department there. I think they got it.

I was helping them organize over there. Then I worked out of the Oakland storefront, and we opened up a legal services office and things like that that really enabled community people to find ways to make their lives better and opened up channels for them to understand about the war. We sponsored educational talks, panel discussions--talked about the war, gave community people an opportunity to go to anti-war marches.

Oh, and at that time, you know, the socialist motherland--the People's Republic of China. [laughter] We enabled people to celebrate the revolution in China and understand about socialism and learn about the difference between different political systems, and how capitalism here in the United States was really not working for poor people and for poor people in ghettos, like Chinatown. It was screwing them over, in fact. So you know, I did stuff like that.

Wilmsen: Would you call that community organizing?

Lee: Yes. Very political community organizing.

Wilmsen: But now what's Laney?

Lee: Laney is a community college in Oakland right outside of Oakland Chinatown.

Wilmsen: Oh, okay. As I said, I'm not from here, so--but how long were you there? You were teaching there?

Lee: No, I went to classes just like everybody else, but I helped lead the Asian Student Union on campus.

### **Working on the International Hotel**

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. How long were you there?

Lee: Oh, maybe just a year or two or so. Then I think I moved to San Francisco and started doing more intense work in San Francisco Chinatown working with people on the Kearny Street block under the International Hotel. I don't know if you're familiar with that, at all. International Hotel.

Wilmsen: I've heard a tiny bit about it, but you can tell me a lot, I'm sure.

Lee: Yes. The International Hotel, that was another project that started here at Berkeley because there was an arson fire. See, that property, land is very valuable, and here's this big, old hotel with poor Chinese and Filipino tenants. Well, somebody tried to burn the hotel down. If you burn it down, then there's no people living there and then you can build a profit generating highrise. So what happened was, there was an arson fire, but somebody woke up and discovered the fire and they were able to put it out, and then that started a whole--now it's still going on today--big battle to save housing in the community and protect Chinatown and Manilatown from the financial land-grabbers who wanted to develop more office buildings.

People like myself went down to the International Hotel to refurbish the rooms and community facilities. We tried to enrich the lives of the poor Filipinos and Chinese who were living there. These were mainly Filipino farmworkers who were retired after working many, many years in the fields with the Mexican farmworkers. If you look back in the history, it was the Filipino farmworkers who led the very first farmworkers' strike in California. Well, they lived at the International Hotel. And so we were learning our history from them. They were living legends. And so the International Hotel and the storefronts there became like the political center, I think, of the whole Bay Area. The heart of the radical left.

Wilmsen: I see.

Lee: And so I left Oakland and moved back to San Francisco, lived in Chinatown, and worked down there full time doing film programs, leading meetings, leafletting, going door to door talking to people, selling political propaganda newspapers. My husband was down there--we weren't married. We weren't even together, but he was there, helped open a child care center. People just were doing amazing things on that block.

Wilmsen: Were you working for an organization doing this?

Lee: Oh, yes, we all belonged--at that time we all belonged to some political radical organization.

Wilmsen: I mean, how were you paying the bills? That's what I'm asking.

Lee: Oh, well, you know, you lived together with other people. So there might be somebody who was working full-time and they would pay for everybody. And then some people might be working part-time--lunch time, maybe at some club like the Bohemian Club working as a waiter serving lunch, and that helps pay for food and utilities. I mean, people were living in communes, and Chinatown was no different.

So I would also be doing odd jobs. I was working at the Dean Witter stockbroker's office. It was down on Montgomery Street. Another time I was working for KGO-TV. I was a clerk at a skills bank housed in KGO. Another time I was working in a little restaurant, I was the cashier. So you did little things to just kind of enable you to serve the revolution. [laughs]

Wilmsen: And how long did you do that?

Lee: This is probably taking you in places you never thought you'd ever be going with it. "I just thought I was learning about California history." And then after that--

Wilmsen: But that's California history.

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: How long did you do that for?

Lee: For a long time. Maybe ten years. Yes, I even cleaned rooms in hotels.

### Strained Relations with Parents

Lee: At that time my relationship with my parents was strained, because starting in '70--I guess from '70 to '80, we spent very little time together. And when we did, it was not pretty. I had very, very difficult years, because by that time my dad was working as an engineer for the war effort. He was designing little things that went into the Pershing Missile. And my uncle was up at Mare Island; he was a very skilled chemist.

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Lee: So everything that I was doing was just totally contrary to everything that they believe in: you know, the American dream, challenging that; challenging their choice to work for the war effort. Oh, you should have heard all the horrible fights over the Vietnam War. And me talking about coming home, and talking about Vietnam. And you know, me proclaiming: "It's not the issue of communism; it's because Vietnam and Southeast Asia is rich, rich, rich with resources--minerals, oil, people--cheap labor. The war, you know, it's another form of colonialism."

They didn't want to hear any of that, uh-uh. They said, "Well, what do you know about that stuff? You don't know. You never read the newspaper. You know, you don't know anything."

And me talking about the history of slavery and how it continues to hurt black people to this day. Me responding to comments like, "Well, why don't they just forget about that. That happened all in the past. We have nothing to do with that." All the typical stuff you hear today.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: I'd say: "Look what they did to the Chinese!"

"Well, we were able to buy our house."

"But the deeds still say--you know, Chinese can't buy houses. It wasn't very long ago that Chinese couldn't go to integrated schools." It was in their lifetime that Chinese were regulated to certain schools. They couldn't go outside; they'd get beat up. You know, "You're going to turn away from that, not going to acknowledge what happened?"

"Oh, no, it's all different now. It's different. And those black people, you know, they should understand."

They bought into this whole thing of the model minority. And I was rejecting all of that. It was ugly. It was very painful, difficult years.

### **Working as a Hotel Room Cleaner, and Helping out with the Union**

Wilmsen: Okay, then how did you get into union organizing?

Lee: Oh! The community organization was just so rich with so many different victories and things. When you do community organizing, you issue a call: you know, "Let's save Harbor Hospital. Let's keep Harbor Hospital open. The community needs access to medical care and the city is issuing an order: 'We're closing Harbor Hospital.' You close Harbor Hospital, where are people going to go?" You issue a call--people come down, we protest, we fight.

But that happens. You know, you plan a demonstration here and you have community meetings there.

But then in 1980, the S.F. hotel industry and the workers had a big fight, and the heart of that fight was around the treatment of room cleaners. Room cleaners were working their fingers to the bone, and making these hotel owners rich, rich, rich. And people in that union who were like me were organizing.

Wilmsen: You were a member of the union?

Lee: Not at that time, but I had friends there and they were organizing. They were taking the side of the room cleaners and all of the other poor people. They were having contract negotiations and they had a big strike. I organized Chinatown community support for the strike. So we'd bring up food to the Fairmont Hotel, and all the Chinese room cleaners and cooks and the Latinos and the blacks, you know, we would feed them lunch, march on the picket line with them. And it was marching on the picket line with them and seeing the union organizers and how this--I really wanted to be working like this all the time.

This was something where I saw that people's work and how they see themselves shapes everything. What you do, how you earn your paycheck, how much you earn, how you're treated on the job: it affects everything and it's all the time. And that's why I said I want to be a union organizer, because that really is a place where you can affect people's lives. Here are the room cleaners that I just worked with last year [points to photo on the

wall]. I worked with all of those up there. The room cleaners I worked with, that's their hands--[pointing to painting on the wall]. .

Wilmsen: Oh, neat.

Lee: Pictures of their hands. And that was something that I said, "I want to do that. I want to be a union organizer. How can I become a union organizer?"

And so I talked to my other friends, you know, who were working in the unions, and they were saying, "You want to make a difference? You don't have to be a union organizer. You should be a worker, though. You want to do this? You should clean rooms just like the people who are cleaning rooms."

I said, "Well, okay." You know, "Here I go."

I tell you, first I got a job at a hotel on Van Ness and Lombard Street in San Francisco. That was okay. You know, I felt pretty humble, and it was making a big impression on me. This was really hard work. Then I got a job at the San Francisco Hilton, and that really humbled me. I mean, I worked my fingers to the bone. The bleach would go in between the rubber gloves, and my hands were totally burned and cracked and bleeding all the time because I wasn't skilled enough to be able to work and avoid the water and cleaning chemicals seeping into my gloves. I hadn't had the skills yet.

And I cried every day. I cried. I cried. You wake up at five and you wait because you're on call, you're such low seniority. Then they call you at six: "Pam, come on in today. Show up at seven-thirty."

"Okay."

I'd start crying at six o'clock. [laughs] I'd get to work, and I'm rushing and I'm working and I'm sweating. And you know, you clean the bathroom mirror and I'm like, okay, and then all of a sudden you see a piece of hair float in the electromagnetic static--swoom! onto the mirror--and then you start to cry again! Oh, man, oh, man, that was hard.

Then that first month, too, the Hilton was just a hell hole. Horrible, horrible place to work. Mean! The manager would yell and scream. She'd push you, she'd hit you, she'd cuss at you.

Wilmsen: Oh!

Lee: Oh, terrible, terrible, back in the eighties. And you'd go up to the cafeteria and on Monday you'd have chicken. And during the course of the week, you'd see the same chicken; it would just take different forms. The last day it would be like chicken spaghetti, and they'd mix in all the meat and throw in whatever. Well, one Friday all of us got food poisoning. It was a regular occurrence.

Wilmsen: This was food for the workers, not for the guests?

Lee: Food for the workers. They would feed them horrible garbage. Terrible. Not only the hitting, the screaming, the pushing; they'd serve them garbage. It was awful food. And it was ugly; the smell!

You know, that was like, okay, you want to make revolution? This is how people live. And you have a choice. You're going to stay here, or you're going to go back to that teaching credential and get that three units? [laughter]

Oh, boy, it was tough for me, but I decided I was going to stay. So I stayed, cleaned rooms. Then another friend told me about a job at the Holiday Inn, so I went over there. The manager, he felt sorry for me, I think. Gave me a job as a hostess. [laughs]

Wilmsen: Oh, really? [laughs]

Lee: I didn't have cracked hands any more, I just had very bad aching feet. A lot of stress interacting with the customers. But yes, I worked there for many years and became active--got elected to shop steward. And the people really respected me. The whole hotel voted for me. I represented the whole hotel to the union.

Then there was different campaigns that the union was doing. I would get involved and would do that. And continued to do community work in Chinatown. Then there was an election for a new president of the union, so I worked on that campaign. When the woman, Sheri Chiesa, got elected, she hired me as an organizer. That's how I got started.

Wilmsen: And that was HERE?

Lee: Hotel Employees, Restaurant Employees, Local 2. So I started off as an organizer. My first organizing project was to organize what is now called the Parc 55 Hotel. It was originally called the Ramada Renaissance on Fifth and Market. And we can continue from there later on.

Organizing the Ramada Renaissance Hotel, 1985

[Interview 2: June 23, 2000] ##

Wilmsen: Today is June 23, 2000, and this is the second interview with Pamela Tau Lee. We were just saying that we'd begin today talking about your first organizing experience, which was with organizing the Ramada Renaissance Hotel. What would be the date on that, approximately?

Lee: The approximate date would have been 1985, I think.

Wilmsen: Okay. And what all happened?

Lee: The Ramada Renaissance is in the edge of the Tenderloin District in downtown [San Francisco] and it was going to be one of the biggest new nonunion hotels to be built in the city in a long time. The big issue was that San Francisco has a strong union history. The slogan is, "San Francisco is a union town." And the Ramada, and the hotel industry as a whole, was looking to San Francisco to try to break that cycle.

In 1980, we had come out of a very contentious battle between the union and the hotel industry. A long strike was waged in 1980 and the workers, the union, won that strike and the employers were very angry about that victory. The conditions that existed before 1980—room cleaners were working with very low wages and had a very heavy workload in these big luxury hotels. They were cleaning up sometimes eighteen rooms, nineteen rooms a day, which is very difficult. In addition, they were called maids, and they were treated like servants. They were called girls. They would not be fed. Women had to bring their own lunches, but it was very difficult to be able to bring your own lunch and keep it in the locker or whatever. And so the conditions were ripe for a big battle.

Wilmsen: Was this at one hotel, or was this citywide?

Lee: Citywide. Citywide: St. Francis, the Fairmont, Sheraton Palace, Mark Hopkins.

At that time there was a much larger African American workforce: women who had been working in the industry about ten, fifteen, twenty years, and just couldn't take it any longer. So they went on strike and that strike is often referred to as the "room cleaners' strike," the strike for room cleaners. But, led by the room cleaners, everyone in the union who worked in the hotels benefitted from participating and helping reap the victories.

The victories included a reduction of the rooms from eighteen to fifteen, which set a national standard. And they were no longer called maids; they were to be called room cleaners. They were to be able to speak out more for themselves on the job. They were to be given a lunch that they could come into the cafeterias and be served. And their wages were also increased. So a big victory.

So out of that the employers were still bristling from that victory. The Ramada was going to begin a trend to try to break the union and to build as many nonunion hotels in San Francisco as possible to dilute the ability of the union to represent workers. So this was an important hotel to win. The union had to deal with the public relations, and the message that was being sent out by this new hotel was, "We're going to provide jobs for poor people in the Tenderloin," and "We're going to be a really good neighbor and we can do that without having to be union." And they tried to line up a lot of the placement agencies and the community services on their side, and went to them to get names of people so that they would be interviewed, mainly dangling this fruit in front of people who really are having desperate lives.

I don't know if you are familiar with the history of that area called the Tenderloin, but it's an area of San Francisco that is very poor, with high unemployment and a lot of welfare recipients, drugs. It's an area where most of the off-color movies and pornography and so-called massage parlors were concentrated. A lot of prostitution and drugs there.

They were going to be a good neighbor and help clean up that neighborhood. So the public relations was not on our side.

### Organizing in San Francisco's Tenderloin District

Lee: When the hotel opened, I was one of a crew of three other organizers to go into the Tenderloin and to talk to people to join the union, and it was quite an exciting experience. I'd never been an organizer before. It was my very first assignment, and I was assigned the list of mainly Asians and others in the Tenderloin to go visit. And not much training at all as to how to do this. And I went by myself. You're assigned; you go by yourself. So you go with a list of names and addresses of people and you're supposed to go and talk to them and you're supposed to find out, you know, what's going on in their lives and to talk to them about the union.

One of my first challenges was trying to find out where people live. You have an address, and it's trying to get in the door. You're walking through these places and you're

stumbling over all of these people--you know, people that are passed out. They're laying in the street; there's fights going on; there's women standing there, you know, waiting for cars; there's a lot of police activity. And you're just kind of weaving through all of this. And in the midst of this, there's a growing immigrant community of Southeast Asians who had just recently come to this country and had settled in the Tenderloin because it was affordable.

You had this, and then on the other hand you had a very vibrant side of it: you know, fresh Asian vegetables and meat, and little children running around weaving in and out through the same people that I had to weave in and out through, [laughs] and mothers carrying little babies on their backs in brightly colored hand-sewn baby wraps.

Wilmsen: So the shops, the vegetable and meat shops, were Southeast Asian?

Lee: Mainly Southeast Asian--grocery stores and noodle shops and things, so it was a very lively neighborhood.

And you go to the door and it's gated, with buttons, bells that don't work, and unmarked mailboxes. You ring the doorbell and nobody answers, so you have to stand there and wait until somebody comes in and then you just kind of follow them in. Then you creep through these halls with all different kind of smells: urine and then, you know, at another door the aroma of stews that families might be cooking. You can smell simmering rice; you can smell soup brewing; you can smell all kinds of home-cooked meals being prepared all together. And dark, dark hallways. You get to a door and you knock.

Many of the people that I visited on the list were Southeast Asian. So they opened the door, and there on the other side of this door is just like you've walked into this heaven. You take your shoes off and you go in and they're very, very welcoming, very kind. And immaculate, clean rooms with woven mats on the floor, and pillows; maybe a modest little stereo set; pictures. There might be calendars that are bright colored and have a picture of an Asian girl with her face very pretty--not one of those nudie calendars. [laughs]

You'll be there and the people are very, very polite, and their family will come. Then you talk in real simple English, and people would tell you that, you know, yes, that they got the hotel job referral, they went for an interview, and that maybe one of them was hired; maybe some others didn't get hired. You know, they're just very, very happy to have a job. And I just felt very awkward about talking right away about the union. I was like, the people have gone through so much to get here; I wanted them to tell me what was going on in their lives. So I became close to many of these people. I would go, and we would have dinner together and we would just talk about their lives, and they would tell me their stories.

The Southeast Asians have been through so much because of the war, and have brought such pride with them. I guess to just illustrate, it was like, when they opened the door, and you're in this dark, dingy, smelly hallway and then you go into just another world I didn't know anything about. It was a very rich, very powerful experience. Over the course of I think two years--maybe not quite two years, maybe a year and a half--of talking with these hotel workers and going back, and they would tell me what was going on, you could tell some people who would be very up front and open and would share, and then some who were a little bit more hesitant because they were afraid of losing their job, others who might be just lying to you--[laughs]--just to tell you what you want to hear. You got a sense of that.

But overall, people were very happy to be working. It was a totally new experience for the majority of folks who were either farmers or who were intellectuals, others who had been rather well-to-do and had never worked a day in their lives. But they began to see over the course of the year different problems in working at this hotel. Mainly people in the restaurant are the ones who I talked to, because they needed to have some level of English. The room cleaners were not as able to talk to me in English, so that was my problem, not theirs. But the restaurant staff began to see that they did need a union, that there were different things in how they were being scheduled to work that they felt were not quite fair. They felt it was not right how they saw other people being treated. So gradually over time, most of the people that I encountered eventually signed union cards.

Wilmsen: What were some of the unfair practices? Can you give some examples?

Lee: Oh, that on a schedule they didn't recognize seniority or whatever, that they would bring in people who were their favorites.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Lee: They also felt that there were some people who were paying off those who were making the schedules. Those kinds of things.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Lee: And when we talked to them, we said, "You know, there must be a system. It must be objective. People who are called into work, it has to be equally distributed among people who start at work at the same time. There must be a system that everybody can see. No need to have to bribe somebody in order to get work."

Wilmsen: Right, right. Yes.

Lee: So those are the labor rights things that they began to learn about, that they had no idea of before. Then there was another group of people that I met that were mainly African Americans—this happened to some Southeast Asians too. When the hotel recruited, or it set up their interviews, the people from the Tenderloin were some of the first to be interviewed. But when I got names of people and their hire dates, and then they would tell me the hire dates of other people that they were working with, it was discovered that the hotel had a pattern where they opened their doors for interviews to the Tenderloin people. That made the hotel look really, really good. But the Tenderloin people were the first to be interviewed, but they were not first to be hired! I found out that the hotel hired mainly young white people first. So their hire dates were sooner, and then the Tenderloin people got in after them. So when the hotel opens you always over-hire, and then once you figure out how many people it takes to really function and provide the service, then you start to lay off. So then with most of the Tenderloin people at the bottom of the hiring list, they all got laid off.

So the Tenderloin community service agencies felt betrayed that they had provided all those people needing jobs, and the PR began to turn against the hotel in terms of their credibility. We were able to help people articulate what they thought was going on by going door to door to people and comparing these lists, to be able to see, yes, this is what was happening. And those who were laid off first were the African Americans. It was very sad. Just that pattern. The African Americans were laid off, and so were many Southeast Asians, but the ones that they did keep were mainly the Southeast Asians and the East Asians. They were able to keep their jobs, but there weren't that many of them. The majority of the people hired were young white people. So that was one thing that I'll never forget out of that organizing drive.

But it took many years and that hotel did not become union until I was already assigned to many other jobs later. I eventually became a union staff director. And I think I had even already left the union before the hotel finally signed a union contract.

Wilmsen: Oh, really?

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: So it really took a long time.

Lee: It took almost ten years.

Wilmsen: Wow. Now were you ever concerned for your own personal safety when you were going around the Tenderloin?

Lee: Oh, yes. You know, you go into these hallways and meet people, and some people that I went to visit were drug addicts and they would be living with other people. You know, "Well, let's talk in the hallway." [laughs] I'm like, I really don't want to go into that apartment. Most of the visits had to be done at night, so you would be walking around the area at night. So it was quite frightening, but I was young and determined. I wouldn't do it now. [laughter] Not unless I was with somebody. And if I was a staff director or supervisor, I would never assign anybody to do that by themselves. But I was young and I didn't know any better.

### The Las Vegas Strike of 1984: A Watershed Event for HERE

Wilmsen: Now, did you have anything to do with that Las Vegas strike in 1984? I read somewhere that was a watershed event for HERE, for the hotels union.

Lee: Hmm.

Wilmsen: You weren't involved in that?

Lee: No. It had tremendous impact because that event then gave lessons to our union and our membership: seeing that the union needed to be a strong, fighting union, and that workers needed to be organized en masse. Workers needed to have leadership abilities and be participating in activities that they were not accustomed to doing: huge picket arrests; mass actions in the street; bringing in celebrities, church people. So out of that came then the blueprint for many cities around the country, San Francisco being one of them; Los Angeles, another; New York, another. I think that was, for us, a turning point that then, "Oh, that's the way we want to go."

Prior to that time, if you worked in the union you were called a business agent. They were called business agents, and you mainly took your case to the business agent. The business agent would go make a deal--workers didn't even have to be there--and then they come back and tell you what they'd done, whether you liked it or not. The worker had little say. And many of these business agents might have been paid off by the employer. It was just very undemocratic, and people were not happy, but didn't have any other vision until Las Vegas.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. So was there a breakup within the union then after that?

Lee: Yes. Big shakeup. A lot of rank and file became much more active, would actively run against the old established leadership. And the International from the union was involved in Las Vegas, and they came to San Francisco. We were under trusteeship, and that means that you're taken over by the International. Rank and file people were suspicious of them, too. I mean, union members had been so poorly represented that they didn't like anybody. [laughter] They were going to take it over themselves! But as it turned out, the International played a really good role, although people didn't realize it at the time, and brought new models, new methods, and eventually developed a really good rank and file leadership, where today the union looks very different.

### Diversifying Unions, and the Rights of a Union Organizer

Wilmsen: Is there anything else you want to talk about regarding your union organizing experience? Any other key events?

Lee: Key events. I think that, for me, I could see it was very unusual. You didn't have that many Asian Americans. I was, I think, one of the first crew of Asian Americans in the union movement doing this kind of work. I think that you'll find that many of us are about the same age. We came out of the civil rights and the campus struggles. Prior to that, you had very few Asian union people and they were mainly business agents that utilized the old methods. They were very, very old.

So now I have been able to see, as a result of people like us across the country getting involved, we have now what is called the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance. It recruits and trains young Asian Americans from all over the country. We've got organizers in unions who can speak the various Southeast Asian languages and have just tremendous leadership skills--very refreshing. It's quite a wonderful progress, evolution. And I got to see it within twenty years.

Yes, there are many stories. One--it's a silly story, but it shows some of the things that you have to do. Another time I had to go to a little motel in the Tenderloin to talk to somebody. It was a small, little motel. One person, the manager, I went up and introduced myself, and he had never had any encounter with the union before. And it's very typical of what I had to go through in the beginning: he wouldn't let me go talk to the workers, and he was going to call the police. I don't know how many times I had to wait around for some uncooperative manager to call the police. Only to have the police come and explain that this lady, me, is just doing her job. How many times a head chef tried to chase me out of his kitchen because that was his domain and I had no right to be there. I'd get chased out of the kitchen. It was just so archaic when I first started. You know, the

union rep going in and walking through the hotel. It was so unusual then and the managers were totally freaked out.

Now you can walk most anywhere in the hotel and talk to union members, but not when I first went in. A lot of fun times. [laughs] And it's really comical to see the police explain to the chef, that, "Nope, this lady is doing her job and she's supposed to be here. You have to leave her alone." A lot of stories like that.

### Negotiating a Union Contract at the Mark Hopkins Hotel

Lee: I think one big story was at the Mark Hopkins [Hotel]—I don't remember the year. I think it was—oh, it might have been '89, where it was negotiating the contract. When you negotiate the contract, you sit there with the union president, and you sit there across from the hotel lawyer, the general manager and their head managers. Then on our side is our union president, myself, and then all the workers that I could organize who were on the union committee.

The union made a proposal around the contract negotiations. The employer then made a proposal for their contract. Theirs would violate some of the major components of ours--foundation of seniority and things that were a major foundation for the union contract--it would violate all of those, and also put \$2,000 cash into the hands of the majority of the employees. \$2,000 cash, up front money, one month right after closing the deal. If they signed a contract, \$2,000 would be in their hands. The employer says, "Well, you're afraid of our contract."

We said, "We're not afraid of your contract."

They say, "Okay, if you're not afraid of our contract..."

We said, "We just want to bargain. We want to just bargain over it."

They said, "No, no. Let's do this," they said, "Let's have a vote. Let's let the workers vote for your contract or ours and we'll have the election in one month."

And the president of the union turned to me and she said, "Well, Pam, what do you think?" And I had seventy workers behind me and I said, "It's a piece of cake."

Inside I was dying. I had no idea how we were going to do this in one month, of a hotel which had maybe 250 Local 2 members, twenty-four-hour shifts of people going in and out. How were we going--

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Lee: --to get them to vote for something that was very complicated on the employer's side, and was going to put \$2,000 in their bank account within a few weeks?

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: I think that was the most intense leadership development work we had to do in a long time! A lot of committee meetings, identifying your key people who understood how this was really going to destroy them and really cripple them for the future. We got them to meetings. We sat and together networked the whole hotel: identified everybody, who knew who; what was the key message; how were we going to reach them? We developed a strategy of being able to identify those people who would understand it the best, and then work out from there. Then we had Spanish languages. We had the African American crew of people who were older, who didn't talk to anybody new. We had the Asian languages, and it was Chinese, Cantonese, Mandarin; it was the various Southeast Asian languages. Then you had a strong group of people who were young and gay, and just very carefree and could really use the \$2,000! [laughter] It was going to be hard.

But we just crafted a message that said the employer's proposal looked like a treat, like a candy, but actually it was a sugar-coated bullet. That it looked sweet on the outside. It was sweet; it was going to be so rich; it was going to make you feel so good; it's something you really, really liked, but when you bit into it, it was going to explode! And I think in those few weeks people learned more about the foundations of their work rules: why it was important to have work rules, why it was important to respect seniority, and other issues that they [the management] wanted to do away with. And I was in the hotel morning, noon, and night. I just lived--I have a little boy and I barely got to see him during that time. I was just in the hotel all the time.

One morning I was in the hotel at the morning break in the coffee room, passing out the leaflets, talking with people, and the general manager came in. And the general manager stood right in front of me and says, "Are you Miss Lee?"

"Yes."

"I want to talk to you."

"Okay."

"Let's talk about the contract."

"All right."

"I want a debate with you right now."

I said, "Sure. Let's do it." And so we sat down at the table in the middle of the restaurant, in the employees' cafeteria. Some people ran out and pretty soon they came back with all kinds of people--maybe there was twenty people. By the end there must have been 150 people crowded in there: managers, everybody, standing on tables, standing on chairs.

We're just debating the issues of the contract, and him just trying to say that people don't need the union, people don't need the seniority, they want to be able to work as much as they can, they want to be able to do work out of their job classification because workers wanted to learn other skills and working out of classification did not matter [to the workers].

And I had to talk about how people, you know, were not going to fall for the hotel's tricks to try to undermine these basic tenets, and to try to work people like slaves and be able to have people do things at the managers' beck and call, but couching it as some kind of wonderful job opportunity for them. It wasn't going to be a job opportunity. It was going to enable the hotel to scale back on how many people they had on their payroll. It was going to enable managers to call people in morning, noon, and night without advance notice and call workers to do anything the managers wanted. The workers could see through the hotel's proposal.

Oh, it was back and forth, back and forth. Finally the general manager threw up his hands, [laughter] and he walked out. And I tell you, workers were cheering and jumping up and down and screaming. It was just wonderful. I didn't do it by myself, but nobody else could really speak up. Everything I was saying, everybody in that room already understood. They were not there to just see a debate and make a decision; I could already feel that they we were all together, you know.

And so the next week we had the election. There were two time slots for workers to cast their vote. Workers were coming in and going up to the Top of the Mark to cast their votes. (You should go there one day and look out the Top of the Mark. It's a beautiful view.) They'd never been up there, to such a beautiful part of the hotel before. Then the federal mediation government representative was present watching all of this, checking

off the rolls, making sure everybody was proper, and nobody voted twice. They're putting their little ballots in. So at the end of the night, I think the last vote was around ten, so then after that, she [the federal mediator] says, "Okay, let's count the votes."

We all sat down and were sitting there watching her open this box. She'd piece-by-piece open the paper and put it to one side, open the paper and put it to one side, open the paper and put it to one side. And all of these things were going on her left side and then a few were going on her right side. Many, many were going on the left side, and I was dying. I said, "Oh, my God! We're going to get killed! Oh, my God!" And as it turned out, the final vote--not everybody came to vote--but the final vote was something like 132 to 36, for the union.

Wilmsen: For the union.

Lee: I got so dizzy, I almost passed out right then and there. It was so overwhelming. And the employer, the general manager, these corporate lawyers from back East, they just put their head down and walked out of the room. Then the rest of the room just cheered.

The next morning I was down at the employees entrance at six o'clock a.m. with the announcements, you know, "The union won," and people were dancing into the hotel!

And imagine they were going to get the next Tuesday--I think the vote was on Thursday, so the next Tuesday they were going to have \$2,000 in their pockets, but they voted against it. Women were dancing and cheering, and people were high-fiving. It was just the most wonderful thing to see how people could really do the right thing. Very powerful. But it was that network of leaders in the hotel: they worked, they worked, they worked; they got the message out. And I think that's one of the other highlights.

### **Getting Involved in the Environmental Justice Movement**

Wilmsen: Oh, that's a great story. Now, how did all of this lead you into an interest in the environment?

Lee: Well, it didn't lead me to an interest in the environment, actually. [laughter] It led me to get very burned out, actually. As I said, I have a little boy who around this time--see, he's twenty-one now--he was not even ten yet. He was six or seven. And I think, looking back, it was very hard. I wish that I had done things a little differently. But the union at

that time was--and the effort--that was my life. I didn't have a very balanced life, so vacations, rest periods, all of that, didn't happen, and I got a little fried.

One day, between meetings with my staff, I opened up a letter and it was a job announcement. It talked about being able to work with all different kinds of unions and training, and so I just thought, "Oh, that's kind of interesting--health and safety," so I just wrote a one-paragraph thing--hand written, I think--and just sent it off. A few weeks later I got a response back to come in for an interview.

During this time, like I said, I was one of the few Asians working in this kind of work. So there was a ceiling, a glass ceiling.

Wilmsen: Within the unions?

Lee: Within the unions, yes. When we had the leadership meetings on Monday, besides the president of the union, I was the only other woman. It was all men--about seven, eight men. That kind of weighed on me. I was not that close to the president. Her main people that she talked to and confided in and conferred with were mainly the men. And she said that she left me alone to do my work because I was so competent--[laughs]--that she never had to really check up on me.

But that had another side to it: if nobody ever checks up on you or bothers to check in or drops by your office to say hi--also there was not much opportunity for me to learn other things or be put on other kinds of assignments, so that, you know, I could see that this was going to be it. And this was driving me nuts. Look at the hours I had, and the imbalance of my life. That when I would go home--and maybe we'd as a family take a drive to Stinson Beach, I was asleep most of the time. I rarely got to see what the water looked like: I was asleep. So all that kind of weighed on me.

One good thing about being in that group with all men is I got to learn how to speak up for myself. I learned a lot about basketball [laughter] and football, and baseball, because Monday morning, that's how people started off the meeting. So unless I could keep up, I didn't have anybody to talk to. So I kept up my share. And to this day, I'm an avid football and baseball fan.

It was kind of moving away and it was kind of--not kind of forcing me away, but you know, there was not much that I could see down the road for people like me. The union movement had not diversified yet. It's not like today where you have much more people of color in leadership and given support and resources.

Wilmsen: So on this union board, then, the president and all the other men, were they white?

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: So you were not just the only Asian, but the only person-of-color leader?

Lee: Right. The vice president who came every once in a while, he was Salvadorian. But he also did not have a very, you know, key role.

Wilmsen: Okay, so then you applied for this other job?

Lee: Yes. And to my surprise, I got it! I think it was a combination of the community organizing experience and the labor experience. People here wanted to outreach more to workers who did not have access to health and safety, access to their rights.

Wilmsen: And was this with the union, too?

Lee: No. Here.

Wilmsen: Oh, that was this job, here at UC?

Lee: Yes, at UC, yes.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. Oh, okay.

Lee: And here in my current UC position, they were very progressive in their thinking in that they felt that young MPHs coming out of the School of Public Health trying to learn the labor movement, trying to learn community organizing, trying to be able to interface with communities of color, was harder than somebody coming from the union movement to learn health and safety, so I guess that was their strategy. That's probably why I was selected to do this.

I was doing work--I think it was with construction [unions]--learning the trade here, when I got a call from somebody in Washington, D.C., who has since passed away. We became very good friends. Her name was Dana Alston. She was working with the PANOS Institute. They are an environmental organization that is doing work around the globe, mainly Third World countries around issues of environment. But she also was starting to identify people from across the country to look at communities of color here in the United States and their relationship to the environment.

So she came to talk to me (apparently somebody gave her my name). We took a walk to a coffee shop on Telegraph and she talked to me about things I'd never heard about: the concept of environmental racism; and she talked about a place called Cancer Alley in

Louisiana, on the Mississippi, where the refineries and other chemical factories are. She discussed with me what the impact that Cancer Alley was having on the communities, and people dying of cancer. I'd never heard any of this before.

She had experience organizing in the South, and as it turned out, she was just a tremendous organizer and visionary. What she wanted me to do was to learn more about this. She also talked to me about how this reflected my experience living in Chinatown and the Asian community being in California and working with communities of color. And so it just started the balls rolling in my mind, starting to think about these issues.

We talked often. Another fellow contacted me, Charles Lee, who is the author of *Toxic Waste and Race*. It was research conducted by the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice. It was that research that documented the siting of hazardous waste facilities in predominantly communities of color. So the two of them communicated with me to think about the relationship of environment to racism and occupational health and safety, and to write a paper for an upcoming meeting which was to be the first people of color summit on environmental justice.

So that really focused me to start to think and research and talk to people and then just draw on my own experience, and I produced a beginning paper on that. Since then many others have written things, and that was kind of the starting point. Now I sit on the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and they have what is called "special populations." [laughs] You know, in the ten years from that little paper we have become institutionalized. We're called "special population." But that got me involved. It was those two individuals, and then the whole effort around the summit that brought together 600 people from around the country to talk about these issues that got me to this place called environmental justice.

#### The First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991

Wilmsen: Can you talk a little bit about that first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit? That was 1991?

Lee: Yes. 1991, in Washington, D.C. It was so powerful to see people of color in this room talking about their struggles for justice in this country. I had not heard anything as dynamic and comprehensive since the Civil Rights Movement when I was young. Powerful voices were able to bring together, in a very comprehensive approach, the issues

of injustice in this country, the issues of racism, the issues of economic disparity in this country, and to articulate the need for a movement for justice.

When you came into that room, you saw native people from Alaska, the Shoshone--the Shoshone tribe from the deserts of Nevada--the various tribal nations in Minnesota. You saw African Americans who lived in small towns like McIntosh, Alabama, in the South, New Orleans, with African Americans from Harlem and Detroit and South Central Los Angeles. You saw brown people from Puerto Rico, Latinos from the border living on the Mexico-U.S. border together with Chicanos from New Mexico and California and farmworkers.

There was a sprinkling of us Asians. [laughs] We filled one table. There wasn't many of us. There was a reverend--a Korean reverend who called us the yellow jellybeans because we were like, "So look at all of these wonderful colors and there's a little table--yellow jellybeans." There wasn't very many of us, but we were there from Hawaii, and from California mainly, and from the East Coast. Also, we were mainly at that time Chinese, Japanese, and Hawaiian.

The representative from Hawaii spoke very powerfully on the demand for this country and for the participants to look at what had happened to the Hawaiian people and how they were stripped of their land. The land was stolen, and now their population is now down to 1 or 4 percent of the islands, and the land ownership just not being there. I'd never heard of that before.

And people were there from the Bikini Islands who--their island was bombed--testing of nuclear weapons--and they can never go back to their home. It's been totally encapsulated. Never heard of that before.

And we were all there to try to find out what it was that we are experiencing, and what is it that we want, and what it is that we stand for?

It was several, several days and many speeches, but the product that came out of there was some basic things. One is we cannot be afraid to talk about environmental racism. In many of the discussions when we start to talk with the traditional environmentalists who are mainly white, or groups, or the government, they were very defensive of that term. And we said we can not be afraid to discuss that, talk about what it means: the discrimination of communities and environmental policy and being left out of the process.

The second thing that we stood for was that we speak for ourselves, that we cannot rely on others to speak for us. We cannot rely on attorneys or the mainstream white organizations to speak for us or to carry our fight. We must fight for the resources and the

capacity to make the changes ourselves and to do it in a way that mobilizes people from the grassroots--residents, people who are impacted.

The third thing that we stood for is that we are not NIMBY--NIMBY meaning Not in My Back Yard--that we are not NIMBY, that what we stand for is that this should not be in anybody's back yard. Many wealthy whites were content for this to be in the back yards of poor communities of color. Well, we were not going to say, "No, we don't want it. We're going to put it in rich, white people's back yards." That's not something that we were going to stand for. We were going to always fight for the protection of all--public health of all--the ecology for all.

Wilmsen: Why would you be afraid to talk about environmental racism? Then I have a related question, too, because last time you were talking about when you first heard Jean Quan speak at that meeting when you were a student at Cal State Hayward--

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: And she used the word racism, and that was a scary word for you.

Lee: Right. Oh, yes.

Wilmsen: I was wondering why that was a scary word.

Lee: Yes. Well, racism--when you talk about racism, it seems to divide people. People get very nervous about talking about it. People begin to take it personally, and so how it was discussed in the environmental justice conversations is, "You know, we can't back down from raising what's happening," whereas the mainstream environmentalists, they didn't want us to say anything about racism. They wanted us to use the word "equity." You know, it sounded better. You know, they wanted fairness or "equity." Well, we said, "Well, what? Equity in how pollution is distributed? That's not what we want. We don't want anybody to have to bear any of this, so we don't like the term equity because it doesn't stand for what we mean." What we need to deal with is the racism that is the root cause of why industry was targeting communities of color: communities of color would not have any power; it's much more acceptable to dump this stuff in communities of color. So if we shied away from talking about racism, we would then not be able to articulate the realities, and we felt it was racism.

I think from the time I was in college, to 1991, that as I got involved in the community organizing and everything, I came to understand that a lot better, whereas growing up, you were sheltered from that. You know, your parents tried to protect you from things, and so if somebody called you a name, you were just supposed to just ignore them: "No, I'm

better than that. No, that's not me," and internalize it, not talk about it. And by 1991, it's very clear: "No, we have to talk about it, because that's this country--the foundations of this country." We weren't afraid to talk about it, but you know, we had to be aggressive.

Wilmsen: Right.

Lee: Maybe that's a better way to phrase it.

A next major component coming out of that summit is how we are for taking action, that action must happen to address these issues. The communities must not have to prove that they've been poisoned, that the community must not have to prove that there was an intent.

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Lee: It should not have to be like a civil rights violation to prove intent. What we wanted industry and the government to use as the criteria for action was the facts: that there is a Superfund site there, that the soil is contaminated, that children are sick, that people have cancer, that the air quality here is bad. Therefore, do something. And what we were coming up against was, you know, "Prove it. Prove that the people are sick." These communities don't have the resources to do that.

The government and industry know these people are sick, know the air quality is bad, know the soil is contaminated--and should take action. So that was another key component.

And others are illustrated very wonderfully in the *Principles of Environmental Justice*. I think there are about seventeen or nineteen of those. But those that I just laid out are probably key.

### Impact of the Summit on Professional Life

Wilmsen: How did the summit affect your work, if at all?

Lee: Well, the summit affected my work in so many ways. One is there was--it was kind of odd--but a whole spirituality that was there to bring back with myself. To be with people who could not only articulate politically so well, but could also share their cultures with us through song, through dance, through arts, through poetry. There was a lot of that beauty that is a fabric of--it's kind of corny, but you could see the richness of this country

that was in that room. That I brought back with me. It impacted me to want to go to the South. I mean, since then, I've gone to the South and been with people I've met at the summit, and gone into Appalachia, and gone to the border regions, and gone to native lands, and been with people to learn and to share. That opened a world to me.

You know, I'd never thought of going to Eastern Europe or to South Africa, but that opened up, as a result of this, the global perspective. Not only the cross-racial and national U.S. perspective, but then also the global perspective became so much more clear to me. That was an impact, and to be able to weave that into my day-to-day work.

The other piece was we came back, Asians came back, we talked together, networked together, and after three years, I think, we formed the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, which has done very powerful work. And that has really changed my life, to sit down with folks and work together to form an organization. We've got the ability to begin to articulate what environmental justice looks like for the Asian communities in this country.

Then the other impact it has had is just networking with folks and working with them concretely in being a support tool as they really try to change society. These organizations that came out of the summit formed intricate networks across the country. And the potential is there for making change. The seeds are there with this movement.

Wilmsen: What organizations came out of the summit?

Lee: Well, one organization was already started. It was called the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice.

Wilmsen: Yes, in Albuquerque.

Lee: In Albuquerque. And I work very closely with them. That's why I was late for this today. [laughs]

Wilmsen: Oh.

Lee: But I've been working with them every since then, for the past nine years. Out of the summit came the formation of the Indigenous Environmental Network, who I also work with very closely as well. They are a network of various tribal representatives and community groups from native lands all over the U.S. and in Canada.

Another network that formed is--well, in the South there was already a network, but it became much stronger as a result: the Southern Organizing Committee for Environmental and Economic Justice. And now there's another African American network.

Wilmsen: Is that a new one?

Lee: Yes, it's new.

Wilmsen: It just started.

Lee: That just started in the last year.

Wilmsen: Okay. Henry Clark was involved in that.

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: I interviewed him, too.

Lee: Yes, Henry. A farmworker's network has also formed coming out of the summit, and then there's an emerging northeast network. So these are the various ones that I've been working with over the past nine years and helped.

#### Outcomes of the Summit: Focus on Landfill Siting, and Drawing the Attention of "Mainstream" Environmental Groups

Wilmsen: Tell me about facilitating the workshop on occupational health at the summit.

Lee: It was a packed room. I didn't think that it was going to be that popular, but as it turned out, people came. There were farmworkers, there were people representing teachers, garment workers, electronics assembly, and health care workers. Oh, just a whole gamut. And this was the first time that they were able to talk about what it meant to be a worker of color and their experiences regarding their health on the job.

And story after story of the kinds of jobs that workers of color were being hired into. Those are the dead-end jobs that were usually the most dangerous. Stories where people had to do work that was obviously very hazardous but never got any equipment to help them protect themselves, or any training on the hazards. None of that. And stories also of people when they tried to speak up just getting ignored. And other stories of other people

who have died. You know, because they might have been working in the shipyards, doing work with asbestos, and who are no longer here. A lot of farmworkers talked about their pesticides experience.

So it was like a first opportunity for people to speak on what they had experienced and to see that there was this pattern. And out of that, you know, we printed some notes and things, but there was not much follow-up work that could actually happen. There were not resources there. The focus of a lot of the environmental work was mainly going to look at the siting of landfills. So you know, the potential did not get reached over these past nine years, but a tremendous amount has been done working through these networks to develop their capacity. But overall, when you look at the materials--readings--very little is written about workers of color and the impact of work on their health.

Wilmsen: Why do you think that is?

Lee: Well, maybe one reason is a lot of the people driving this, on siting of landfills and things, do not come from worker experience, but they're very articulate and powerful and capable. Bob Bullard and folks--their experiences and talent, and knowledge base have been in this area, and so I think that that is one area that is much more visible.

The other reason is that the EPA has responded to the work that these communities have done to hold it accountable. Other agencies like OSHA have not, even though there's an executive order that tells them that they should. So as a matter of fact, on Tuesday, myself and others met with the EPA and talked about this and said that we really need their help to bring to the White House our concern that OSHA and the Department of Transportation--these other agencies--are not paying attention to these issues like the EPA has.

There's probably a variety of reasons. The majority of workers of color in hazardous low-wage jobs are not yet organized into unions. The unions are trying, but the voices from this sector have not been tapped.

Another big thing that came out of some of that that I forgot to talk about was--maybe Henry has talked about it--was the white mainstream environmental organizations. My friend Dana Alston gave a wonderful speech at the summit which held them accountable for a lot of the conditions that existed, and their continued history of turning their backs on communities of color when they've tried to go to them for help. It was a very controversial statement, and as a result she lost her job. But it wasn't for naught. What happened out of that was a big turnaround in many of these groups to start to channel resources and pay better attention. But they can do a lot more.

Wilmsen: Now, Michael Fischer was at that summit, wasn't he?

Lee: Yes, he was there.

Wilmsen: Were there others from the big mainstream groups?

Lee: Yes. And I'll have to get their names, but yes, Michael Fischer was there. I think he might have been on the stage with Friends of the Earth, the fellow representing Friends of the Earth. I can't remember—it could have been Fred Milar.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: Yes, but Michael Fischer was there.

Wilmsen: And then you were working on developing the National Agenda for Environmental Justice Action? Did that come out of that? That's something I picked up looking through the *Proceedings* volume that you loaned me.

Lee: I'm not sure what that actually refers to. We might have to look at that, to see what it was. [laughs] It doesn't trigger for me right now.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: Yes, I'm not sure. Maybe it was something Ben Chavis was doing, but I'm not sure. Yes, Ben Chavis was there, too.

Wilmsen: I think it was in his remarks where I read about that, actually.

Lee: Yes. I think it was some side thing he might have been doing.

Wilmsen: Oh, okay.

Lee: Alone. [laughter]

Wilmsen: Okay, [referring to interview outline] you talked about applying for the job here. Is there anything else about the summit you want to say before we move on?

Lee: There probably should be, but I can't remember right now.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: This might be a good time to stop, but what other questions do you have?

Wilmsen: Well, I was going to ask you a little bit about the history of this job--what you know about it. I'm curious about how the university got interested in creating your position and kind of all the issues around there. Do you know that?

Lee: I think that when I was first hired that I was mainly going to be training and working with different unions and trying to carve out a program that could reach more people of color. But what happened also was the summit and a visit by Dana and my aggressive pursuing of this development, integrating this into my work plan as well as maintaining my original job description. And I'm so fortunate here in that the leadership at LOHP [Labor Occupational Health Program] saw that this was very important work, so allowed me to do that. I don't think that this was something that the School of Public Health had anticipated.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Lee: In fact, I'm sure it wasn't. [laughter]

### Founding the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, 1993

Wilmsen: You mentioned APEN, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network.

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: Can you tell me about what all happened in getting that organized and founding that? Because you were one of the founders and you're on the board now, right?

Lee: Yes. It was a result of when we came back from the summit. And there was Peggy Saika who was at the summit as the executive director of the Asian Law Caucus at that time. Now she's the former executive director of APEN. We just hired Joselito Laudencia, our new E.D. But her role was tremendous.

And there were other people, from campus actually, that were students, just graduated. Pamela Chiang, who was a student here at UC, and then myself and then another fellow named Jack Chin, who was with the San Francisco Foundation. He did not attend the summit, but had heard about it and was interested in opening funding opportunities for some work to develop an Asian group. And Eric Saito, Martha Matsuoka, and Francis

Calpultura. So we met for about two years and looked at the needs and what we would want to do, and worked with the San Francisco Foundation, which helped us develop the bylaws and those structures to get one of those C3--kind of tax status.

Wilmsen: Oh, 501(c)(3)?

Lee: The 501(c)(3), that's it. And then we got the funding and hired Peggy Saika and a woman named Yin Ling Leung to be our first staff.

The first thing that we wanted to do was a needs assessment, to be able to talk to various organizations—Asian organizations—about the issues of environmental justice, and to see how these issues reflected in their work and their experiences. That took a couple of years. Then looking at the data, we also did some demographics. We also participated in other research like seafood consumption and other things that were going on—toxic lead—as a way to investigate the situation. We then met with some folks in Richmond, California, the Laotian community there, and started talking about the need to be able to develop our organization from the grass roots. We focused then on Richmond, California. And I think probably Henry has talked a lot about what it's like to live there--

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: —in the poverty. Our main focus was with the Southeast Asians—the Laotian community's rich history that they have in Richmond, but being left out. So yes, that's been mainly our work. Now, we'll be focusing on developing a network in San Francisco—Bay View Hunter's Point—and also looking at networking various organizations to create a network.

Wilmsen: How have you found the fund raising for APEN?

Lee: Our fund raising has been very good. We've tried to be very strategic. One is to let our work guide the fund raising. We've also been very strategic in terms of what kind of work that we do. We know that there are funders out there very interested in that, so it's not been bad at all. We are very careful and thorough. And as a result, funders like what we've done, so we get repeat funding. Our staff is very thorough. [laughs]

Wilmsen: So who are some of the foundations that have funded it?

Lee: I'd have to get a list, but there is the California Endowment, Gerbode Foundation, Hazen, and the Public Welfare Foundation, to name a few. We had a government NIEHS grant—National Institute of Environmental Health Science. We won an EPA environmental justice grant. Our youth work—it's mainly with women, so groups like the

Ms. Foundation. We've had quite a few organizations: Unitarian Veech has funded us; San Francisco Foundation was our first funder. They were very, very helpful. We also have many individual donors. So we've done pretty well.

### **Working with the Laotian Community in Richmond, California**

Wilmsen: What are some of the issues facing the Laotian community now that you mentioned?

Lee: Well, what we see as the need is--as I said earlier--building capacity for communities to speak for themselves. So we are looking at what kinds of capacity building needs to happen. If you're looking at some of the data in terms of Richmond and the Laotian communities there, there's a high poverty rate. Forty percent of the adult Laotian population live below the poverty level. There's also been a history of, say, housing that is next to industrial facilities that have a record of accidents and releases. There's also been a history of housing not being well maintained by the owners where they rent, so the paint is pre-1970. The lead exposure is very high, not only in the paint of old houses, but in the soil. Then there's the lack of health care, and the inability to be able to have a voice in the democratic process in the city.

Given a lot of that, what we are trying to build there is an organization of participants from the community who are young people who also reflect working families, seniors, and traditional leaders. When you're looking at the capacity, a lot of the agencies fund mainly the traditional leaders and they bypass all these other important sectors. What we are looking at is these other sectors as well and doing a lot of training.

The youth have just won a big campaign in Richmond High School where--what did environmental racism look like to them? Well, one was their school was filthy and was non-responsive to the students. The bathrooms were horrendous, and they wanted those cleaned up. Also there were no counselors to be able to work with students, and so they did a big campaign. Well, that's what it looked like to them, so let's work with them and build their ability to wage a campaign to make change.

Last week we celebrated a victory. These students went out and organized in the community: had parent meetings, worked with the other youth, got cards, went to the board of supervisors with a whole group of youth, and met with the principals. Anyway, they won a demand for improved counseling services. They got the teachers on their side. Teachers are now going to be involved with counseling, career counseling and other counseling, which is what they wanted to do. And so what it looks like in terms of

Richmond, you know, there are these social economic issues: what's that look like to the community? Then building their capacity to address those issues and getting victories.

The other sectors were the accidents and the releases of fumes into the air and no emergency warning system. So that campaign was waged, a victory was had, the county committed to do this. Well, they've backed down. They've not followed through. I just was at some meetings in the Laotian community. They're going to follow up and they're going to protest, and have press conferences and whatever to get that commitment real. So that's what it looks like for them. Community meetings are held in four languages. The three Lao languages and English.

Wilmsen: Oh.

Lee: So it's very dynamic. And community people are very patient with each other and very respectful. How do you communicate about these issues of holding government accountable to a community that has never had to do anything like that before? Just getting to basics--understanding what toxics are and how toxics can make you sick--was a whole big cultural unknown. These kinds of environments are just so different from what their experiences were.

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Lee: In their homeland they could walk down a path and see a greenery that they could recognize that they could cut and eat and bring home and make soup with or stir fry or do something with. They could go to the river and fish and come home and cook the fish whole, and eat it with different spices. Here you can't do that. The concept of going to fish in the bay and bringing your fish home and not eating the skin, because of the toxics in the skin, and cutting out the guts to eat, and only eating one of those fish a month, is very unusual.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: They're not used to that. And you know, things like contaminated fish that make people sick, they don't understand. The doctors here treat you very differently than what they're used to, and they ask you things that you don't understand. They tell you to do things to stay healthy like peel the skin off the fish or take a medicine at a certain time or these kinds of things. It's very hard for them to understand. So what's happening in Richmond with the Laotians is our need for the cultural competency, the ability to understand where they're coming from, understand what kind of is happening, and to be able to mesh the two together. Very, very difficult.

Plus the deliverer of the message is unusual. You usually have a traditional elder communicate. Well, we have meetings where you have the elder, you have a woman from the community too, and you have a young Chinese American woman speaking, too. This is very different.

Wilmsen: Has the community been receptive to your efforts?

Lee: Yes, it's receptive. Not like everybody's running to beat down our doors, but you know, we have a community meeting and you're going to have over seventy people there.

Wilmsen: Oh, that's pretty good.

Lee: Yes. So that's what's happening.

Wilmsen: Now, working with APEN, have you worked with any of the so-called mainstream environmental groups?

Lee: I was in a part of one called the National Toxics Campaign--NTC. I don't know if you're familiar with that one.

Wilmsen: That was John O'Connor?

Lee: Yes. How do you know John O'Connor?

Wilmsen: Well, I don't know him; I just know the name. [laughter]

Lee: John O'Connor. I was recruited to be on the board of the National Toxics Campaign.

Wilmsen: Oh. What's the story there? Is there a story there?

Lee: Oh, there's a big story there, and I don't want to go into it now. But I'll give you something to read and then you can come back and talk to me. I'm sure you'll want to talk to me about it.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: Last thing we did at the NTC was to vote to close it. It was very difficult.

Wilmsen: Okay, you want to call it a day, then, today?

Lee: Yes, I think we should.

Wilmsen: Okay.

### **Deciding to Work in the Community Instead of Becoming a Teacher**

[Interview 3: July 19, 2000] ##

Wilmsen: Today is July 19, 2000. And this is the third interview with Pam Tau Lee. So you were just saying that there were some events in 1972, '73, and '74 that were kind of pivotal in shaping your thinking. What were those events and how did they shape your thinking?

Lee: Well, I had been involved in the ethnic studies struggle in the beginning seventies, and that's when I was a student. Then I graduated and was wanting to become more involved in a lot of the issues raised during the course of learning more about the history of Asians in America and the history of other people of color in the United States, and also the history of struggle for civil rights and for democracy in the United States. Those sort of influenced me to try to really pay more attention to what do I want to do with my life, and I decided that as a teacher—I was going through a teacher credential program. During this period I was at Oakland Tech, and I had launched the first ethnic studies program there, and there was a lot of turmoil in the schools. Children were getting killed, and the quality of education was very, very poor. Lack of attention to education. And I came to realize that as a teacher I could play a very good role in society, but I wanted to be able to see what more could I do.

My students--I was the sponsor of a Bay Area group. They called themselves the Bay Area Asian Students. They were made up of high school students from all over the Bay Area that had formed a coalition, and I helped to charter that. They did a lot of events and these activities had tremendous influence. In fact, today many of these students are still very involved in making social change. But I wanted to experience more. So I decided that I was going to not teach, and I left teaching.

I did not finish my credential—even though I was only a few credits short—and went into the community. I just decided that I wanted to live like my grandmother, experience what my grandmother had as a garment worker, as an immigrant person, as a person living in the community. I wanted to experience that again and participate in making that a better place to live. So I moved and did work in Oakland Chinatown and commuted regularly to San Francisco Chinatown and worked there, as well.

At the same time that this was happening, there was work being organized by the U.S.-China Friendship Association to understand more about China. It was a people-to-people friendship to learn and build associations with what was going on in China—to learn about the revolutionary struggle there, also to learn how people were trying to make socialism back in the seventies—sixties and seventies—and how there could be another way that society could be structured. So that was one arena that I was drawn to—learning more about alternative models for how a society could be structured—and I was starting to do more about that.

But what really struck me was—it wasn't like I was going to be Chinese from China. But it was some sort of pride that I was, really—I think many Chinese and Asians really felt a void in terms of pride in their culture and their identity. And China helped to bring [that pride] about [in me]. When our family left Chinatown and moved out to a predominantly white community, there was no village. There was just your neighbor, maybe right next door or across the street. My parents didn't associate with what was going on in the schools. And there wasn't a sense of closeness that I felt when I was with my grandmother and living in Chinatown and people knew each other and helped each other. When someone had a baby, you helped them, and you always remembered if somebody was going to get married. You genuinely cared about these things and you also really took pride in certain events or activities going on in the community that made people feel really proud of who they were. And I think I went back to the community for that as well.

But what happened was in addition to finding pride and identity by going back, several things happened that started to change my outlook as well. In 1972 I was up the street in Chinatown, on Jackson Street and Stockton, and there was a big commotion and many, many people were running down the street to this one corner. What had happened by the time I got there was people were just in a turmoil, in chaos there. People were talking about, "The police beat him up--beat him up! And it was terrible! And we've got to do something!"

It turned out that there was a man who was a dishwasher, who worked at a very exclusive club on Nob Hill. He was a Chinese dishwasher--did not speak very much English, made, you know, just dishwasher wages. He saved his money and he bought some books from China and he set up a little stand made out of a crate on the corner of Jackson and Grant Avenue and he started selling different things: the *Red Book* and some Mao buttons and some newspapers from China. And he apparently had set up this stand, oh, for less than a week, and the police came and started harassing him to take his stand down. He had, I guess, been approached by the police and told he had to have a permit. And he said he didn't know what a permit was. And then they started to take his stuff and he grabbed for his stuff--his *Red Books* and things--back. Then they just apparently threw him down on the sidewalk and started beating him--the San Francisco police.

By that time hundreds of people had come to the corner and witnessed this. They beat him in front of them and then he was dragged away in a paddy wagon. And what happened then was some people said, "Let's go down to the storefronts on Kearny Street and let's talk about what we should do." And everybody--oh, hundreds of people--came down to Kearny Street. This is where the storefronts were that I was talking about--the International Hotel--earlier. They all came down and they all wanted to testify about what they saw. And what happened as a result was, people agreed that they would meet the next day at the police station where Harry Wong was.

Well, actually they marched that day to the police station to protest the harassment of Harry Wong. In Chinese he was called Daih [spells] Wong. That means Big Wong because he was a very big, tall, very husky man. They were going to protest and demand he be released. The police wouldn't release him, and people went back again with a much bigger picket, with signs demanding the release of Harry Wong and to stop the brutality against him.

Nobody could go see him yet. It was not clear about what he was going to be charged with, but he was finally let out on bail. And after some research, I guess the people's grapevine discovered the source of why this happened. [It] came from the establishment in Chinatown, [who] did not want him selling things about China. They were affiliated with Taiwan--called the *Guomindong*--and that group contacted the police and told them to take care of him--do whatever it took to get him off the street. And of course when you do something like that, it only galvanizes the community.

People marched and went to Daih Wong's trial and witnessed and gave testimony as to what they saw. People raised money to get him a permit, a merchant's permit to sell on the street. Newspaper vendors and lawyers came out and helped him with that. So there was no reason to try him any further. It was bogus in the first place. And the community, by giving concrete support with this mobilization in terms of his permit and political support at all his trials, his charges were dropped. Then newspapers just started really focusing on the role of the *Guomindong* and how they were trying to restrict people's democratic rights and free speech.

But what that did for me was--you know, because it wasn't the first time I ever picketed, it wasn't the first time police brutality--but for many people it was the first time they ever picketed a police station and raised the issue of police brutality! Because it was happening to young people all the time, the police were coming in and picking people up and just beating young people, and you know, just accusing them of all being in gangs--what you call racial profiling today. So that had a great influence on me.

### Studying Marxism

Lee: Then I was going back to this block and I got recruited to join a study group. I went to help volunteer and somebody said, "Well, you would like to become a Marxist-Leninist, wouldn't you?" And I said, "Well, I'm really not sure. I don't know what that means." [laughter] And so they said, "Well, why don't you come and check it out." And I said, "Okay."

And by that time many young people had talked to me, you know, about, "Pam, you're just so naïve. You know, you think that everything is going to come about by love and compassion. You know, look what happened to people in the Civil Rights Movement and all the people that were killed. Learn from how people in colonies are having to stand up to really self-determine themselves, and none of that is coming about without bloodshed. So you're just going to have to understand that sometimes with social change there is going to be bloodshed."

Oh, God, that was just, for me, oh! I just didn't want to hear it! [laughs] I just thought, "No, couldn't it be another way?" And so I said, "Well, okay. I'll try to understand what all this means," and so I went down to my first study group and the person leading it happened to be reading the *Paris Commune* at that time, this very intellectual in-depth book on Marxist-Leninism. And this group of us sitting around there had not a clue as to what this person was talking about. Most of us were falling asleep. And so this person said, "Well, I think this is more me than it is you. I'm very sorry, I think we should start with something a little bit more basic." And we read some articles from the Philippines--revolutionary struggles in the Philippines--very nice articles. And then we were also given the *Red Book*. And you know, the *Red Book* was simple enough to read and it was kind of interesting: new, new, new ideas, from, "Serve the people," to, "Political power comes out of a barrel of a gun." I said, "Wow, this is very new, and interesting ideas." So I went back and I participated in these study groups.

But at that time as well, things were happening in the community. They were happening all along, but they were not noticed before. Garment workers were going out on strike. Mass firings of people in restaurants, and the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] coming in. Hospital services being closed--well, not hospital services being closed, but people actually dying in hospitals because there was no translator at the hospitals. Even the hospitals in Chinatown, there was nobody who was able to speak to people who were going in.

And these things were happening all the time, but I think because of the political environment, people were understanding things better. The garment struggles, they were

linking up to, "Well, you know, there's such a big focus on the working class. You know, and there's such a big focus on colonialism. The countries, the colonies, being dominated by imperialists." You know, whether it was British imperialism, or whether it was U.S. imperialism, and these people of color standing up to them. At that time we called them Third World countries, and people of the Third World standing up to these powers. And so we talked a lot, a lot, and tried to understand, what are the lessons from Marx and Lenin, and Mao, and what's happening in the world today? And the whole concept of capitalism, emerging out of feudalism, and then decay of capitalism and imperialism--and just understanding that and seeing history like: oh, this is not how they taught the Russian Revolution in college and this is not how they taught any other history in college or in high school. And I was learning about the world in a totally different way.

#### Learning about Class- and Race-based Oppression through the Anti-War Movement

Lee: So when--let me backtrack. I think the anti-war movement really made the connection for me. And I think I already explained to you before how, because of this political outlook that I was learning, that I could see much more clearly why was the U.S. in Vietnam? Why was Vietnam so politically important? It was because of the resources, not because of the domino Communist effect. But they were fighting the Communists over the resources, and all this thing about fighting for Democracy was bogus, as well. And then seeing that these were Asians with thousands of years of trying to liberate themselves from foreign oppressors and that they were really winning. We used to talk about these Asians, these Vietnamese running around in rubber shoes, you know, bringing down these million-dollar B-52 bombers, and by just out-organizing the enemy, holding their own.

You might think that it was kind of un-American, but we felt, you know, "Right on for the Vietnamese people," and we felt a lot of compassion and unity with them. So then that reflected in the community, where you could see it too. Now we were living, as people used to say, in the belly of the beast. So if the belly of the beast is going to do this to people outside, you know, internally we aren't squeaky clean. I mean, that's going on with us here. And we were looking at the treatment of garment workers and the restaurant workers and the Chinese working on the boats, and understanding much, much better the source of the exploitation there. And we did an analysis, a political analysis of the United States.

Our organization was called the *I Wor Kuen*. [spells] That is the name of a group of Chinese in China who stood up against the imperialists--the white imperialists.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: They lost, but they were a hardy band of revolutionaries. [laughs] And so we took their name, *I Wor Kuen*. We were going to become a part of the US revolution and our role would be to help link up what was going on in our communities with the overall picture. We weren't quite sure about what that overall thing looked like yet, but we needed to just start from where we were at. Class struggle, it became much more clear to us what that looked like and the importance of working people in Chinatown playing a role in making social change, because we could see that the Chinese Six Companies and the *Guomindong* weren't on the side of social justice. They sent police to beat up Harry Wong. They would tell the white media that everything is fine, that people are being paid decent wages. They were owning these places that were dilapidated, rodent-ridden, lead-ridden, with mold on the walls, and then raising the rents from \$40 a month to \$145 a month just arbitrarily. They were the ones that were running the garment factories as well, so they were not going to be the main force to make social change and bring justice in this country. They were not going to be the ones to stop the war in Vietnam or other places, so that was a lesson, and that was why we really began to help support to build greater voice for working people.

And when garment workers went out on strike, we were there to support them and help them understand the class nature of the struggle, and how they should have a voice, and that their voice had meaning, and that if they united together they could win. Not easy with Chinese whose experience was always not to rock the boat. That's what I was grown up with: "If you just stay quiet, you know, you can survive in this country and your children can do better." That's your goal.

Garment workers did not want to have to stand up and fight and draw attention to themselves because they could be blacklisted from every factory in Chinatown if they did. As well as if they went on rent strike. They could be blacklisted from every apartment in Chinatown; they would not be rented to. So that fear was hard to overcome, but people did stand up, marched on picket lines.

The garment factory that I spent my early years in was called the Great American Garment Factory and out of that garment factory in I think '72 those women went out on strike. It was called the *Jung Sai* Strike. [spells]

Wilmsen: What did that mean--*Jung Sai*?

Lee: I think it's a translation of Great American, but sort of different words, but you know, it's the same.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: The parent company--because it was a contracted garment factory--so the parent company was Esprit de Corps, owned by the very famous Susie Tompkins and her husband, Doug Tompkins. It was the parent company. And you know, Esprit de Corps was high fashion but nobody knew who really sewed the clothes and what happened behind the sewing, who was sewing the clothes. So that was at the beginning of what you see today as this whole tremendous movement across campuses--no sweatshops--on our campuses, the anti-Nike stuff. But the seeds were back in the seventies.

That particular effort lasted over a year. A lot of community support. Workers were out of work, but they continued to fight. And I think that their victory in getting a contract was just tremendous. People in the community really celebrated. I think from that moment on, garment workers felt much, much stronger. But it also exposed that their union, was, you know, not very strong, but was the only organization around to organize into, and that we could, from the community, continue to educate Chinese workers to be stronger in their unions. It also made very clear that the petit bourgeois class was totally anti-worker, and that was the first time that was exposed to the community.

#### Debating the Course of the Political Struggle, and Building the Movement in the Community

Lee: Then there was the political, the various revolutionary components fighting with each other over what was the correct line [laughs] on how to lead struggles like this. The two major approaches--one was led by the Revolutionary Union. Their Asian organization was called--*Wei Min She* is the Chinese name [spells]--which ran a storefront called ACC, the Asian Community Center. That was affiliated with the Revolutionary Union. And then there was the *I Wor Kuen*, which was the group I belonged to.

And you know, at that time the *Wei Min She* was saying that this is a working-class struggle; we should mainly focus on that. Raising the issue of racism against Chinese and other minorities would pit them against the white workers. This would divide the working class.

*I Wor Kuen*, on the other hand, said that at the core this is a workers struggle, but that Chinese workers are part of the American working class, and that we must recognize that these are Chinese workers, and there's a specific material foundation for the exploitation and oppression of Chinese workers as opposed to white workers. If there is to be any

unity, that it's not overcoming lies and misconceptions and stereotypes, but that you must recognize that many white workers were pitted against other workers, but white workers had enjoyed better jobs, better pay, better promotion abilities, opportunities, and that workers of color did not. Workers of color were hired into the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs, had less pay, were abused on the job, they were often overseen by whites who abused them, who called them names, who might beat them, or they might hire people of the same color, given them some privileges to abuse and hold down. White workers were enabled to join unions, black workers were not. Chinese workers, they couldn't even walk into the local restaurant union. They were thrown down the stairs and kicked and beaten out on the sidewalk. So these were things that we felt that if there were going to be unity, that you needed to recognize and let's talk about that. So that meant that white workers would have to at some day support affirmative action. That white workers would have to support the elimination of unequal pay, fight for the entry of people of color into their unions, among other things.

##

Lee: So that was also a reflection of the times: real critical thinking about what would it mean to make revolution in this country. Should we actually name the material basis, or just gloss over that and hope that people can just be together? You know, why can't we all be together?

Wilmsen: Right.

Lee: And those kinds of polemics also influenced me a lot--critical thinking and analyzing. So it was things like Harry Wong; there was the garment struggle; there were issues around China, you know, whether or not it was people-to-people or were we really trying to understand the social foundations of new socialism. Could socialism happen here in the United States? What would it look like? Those kinds of things.

Then in '73, I helped open an organization called the Chinese Progressive Association, which I would ten years later be the chairperson of for many, many years. But our organization, the *I Wor Kuen* [IWK], was like the seeds of the opening of this mass organization. It took over a year. IWK issued a call in the community. Much of this happened before I really, really became involved, but this helped shape my thinking and my involvement. They issued a call and called for people to come together to form an organization that would have immigrants and non-immigrants, older people, working-age people, and young people, men and women. People from--

Wilmsen: I'm sorry, who issued the call?

Lee: The *I Wor Kuen*, the political organization I was to later join. So that the community would own this organization and form this organization to speak for themselves. And weekly, people would come and talk about what this organization needs to do, how would it address conditions of women who were what we would call triple oppressed: class, women, and race, ethnic. The young people were being beaten by the police--and brutality, and not having a voice. So all of this took a year. There were bylaws; there was voting on the bylaws. People got practice talking at meetings. When women stood up to speak, the men, by the end of the year, learned to listen to the women [laughs] and not make, you know, snide remarks, not always criticize or correct them. Women were able to stand up and speak with more confidence and not hide and giggle, or not shy behind somebody else and say they had no opinions, because they did. And at the end of the year they had elected a steering committee and officers, a name, and they had bylaws.

They had different kinds of group activities that they would do: serving meals on Sunday nights, showing movies on Saturday nights free to the community. There would be English classes, there would be a women's group, there would be a child care center. All of these things took a year. The funding for this all came from the people, and then people like myself who worked. And members of the *I Wor Kuen*--I was also by that time-- would contribute quite a bit more to this organization. But events, dinners--we just scraped and managed to survive. And today that organization still exists. It's in Chinatown.

Wilmsen: Are you still part of it?

Lee: I'm still a member. I was on the steering committee for the last several years. But they're doing great work in Chinatown. But I think about this a lot--this period of time, where by '75--we had done a lot of events around May Day and the working people's struggle, and thousands of people would come. We would put on plays about working people and people would cheer and find so much pride in being working people and seeing themselves reflected on the stage. It was wonderful. There was this one May Day and we just said, "You know, we think that the Vietnam War"--somebody said, "I think the war will end this year." I go, "What?" Because, "I can just sense, you know, just the power of the world, just really, the strength and the solidarity worldwide around Vietnam." He just said that; it was so odd. And then sure enough--[laughter]

Wilmsen: It ended.

Lee: --it ended. He said, "Wow, I should have put money on that." But you could just sense it at that time. There was great people power. People felt very, very--there was a vision that was shared at that time across--you know, you had brown people and black people and

yellow people and very progressive whites all working together. And we were starting to also work together around the International Hotel, building a huge coalition. So you could just sense there was something there. And there was. And then I think it was the Reagan era--

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: And the Carter.

Wilmsen: Five years later. Oh, Carter was before Reagan.

Lee: Yes, there was Carter, but then there was the whole debate in the political arena: should you vote for--there were whole debates around McGovern, then there were debates around Carter. I reflected this weekend--I was teaching at a union women's summer school, with this young person, and she said, "Oh, I just hate, hate going to campaign for Gore. I want to campaign for Nader, but for my job, I'm going to probably have to whore for Gore," [laughter] is what she said. And we talked about it and it just made me want to come back home and think, "Now, where was I when I was thinking about Carter and Reagan?" You know, we had a big great debate that we were going to boycott that election, that it made no difference. And I told this young person last week about that and I said I think I was wrong. Because I think it did make a difference.

Wilmsen: So you did boycott it?

Lee: Yes, and I think many, many revolutionaries at that time boycotted. Because we thought there was no difference. And that was very--the Reagan years were bad.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: And I think it killed the momentum of the seventies. So I don't know whether the thing with Gore-Bush today is similar, but you know, I asked her to think about it. She said she would. [laughter]

The other thing that I thought about at that time, too, was, you know, we were all very young, and we were not to trust anybody over thirty-five. And as we were getting older--now I'm fifty--fifty-two, fifty-three--but at that time I told her, "Well, it was not to trust anybody over thirty-five," and I think I understand that better today. And talking with this young person and reflecting on the seventies when I was twenty, going on thirty, is that they really did, I think, have a vision. And these young people that I was talking to participated in the recent WTO [World Trade Organization] protest and I think they have

a very good vision. Many of these people are very, very qualified, these young people. I think they're children of the seventies.

And the advice I would give to them or have been giving--I gave to them last week--learning from the seventies, was, "Give the people over thirty-five and fifty a chance. You know, try to talk to them and educate them and understand that people like around fifty-five or so, they're worried about their retirement. They've got ten more years. They might be in union positions or political positions, or some kinds of positions of authority, and they're thinking about retirement right now, and you know, their health care and the fact that they're probably going to live longer, and how are they going to pay for their health? So understand where they're coming from and talk to them about where you're coming from and talk to them about your vision and give them an opportunity to work with you. But if they don't, screw them." [laughter] And I said, "That's what I learned from the seventies." [laughter] And I said, "The same holds for me, too. You know? If I'm not going to be your supporter, then push me aside." And I think that you need to get that momentum, but to also learn from some of our mistakes. So that's what I tried to share with her.

### **The Environmental Justice Movement's Connection to Communities**

Lee: So that kind of led to my foundation when the environmental justice movement started to galvanize in the nineties. I was introduced to it by my friend, I mentioned before, Dana Alston. But then I went down to the Southwest and attended a gathering of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice [SNEEJ]. And I could see there a reflection again of, ah, the life--well, the spirit that I could sense there was very genuine from community people, and the openness to really wanting to tackle new ideas and to participate with others in new ways.

But I also saw, again, a reflection there of allowing and facilitating communities of color to speak for themselves. And that's why I gave you the story of the struggle between the *Wei Min She* and *I Wor Kuen*. Because I see with environmental justice movement the same debates coming forward. Are you going to really empower communities of color to really speak for themselves, are you really going to share the resources with those communities, or like the NTC [National Toxics Campaign], are you going to just wish everybody loves each other [laughs] and gets along?

These predominantly white organizations did not want to really acknowledge that there was a different experience felt by communities of color. The white middle class, the

[toxic waste] organizations, you know, balked at statistics about the sitings. "Oh, no, we have that too," you know.

Wilmsen: You mean, "They're in our communities too."

Lee: Right. They think their experience is the same, but it's not really. It has been documented that EPA cleanup orders and fines levied were different in white communities versus communities of color. The fines and orders were stricter in white communities.

You know, other things were exposed to illustrate this phenomena. I guess the super oppression that goes on for communities of color--not wanting to acknowledge any of that. And that really hurts the relationship. So in NTC, we had a big falling out around that. I don't know if it was shared to you by others that you've talked to in NTC about it.

### **The Rise and Fall of the National Toxics Campaign**

Wilmsen: Actually, do you want to talk about NTC now?

Lee: We could.

Wilmsen: Because I'd actually like to start at the beginning--how it got started and how you got involved and all that kind of stuff--because I actually don't know very much about it. I've been searching the library catalogs and there's nothing--very little--that I've found written about it. There's some books that they produced.

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: But it doesn't give their own history.

Lee: Oh. I don't know whether I can go back into the early history. You might need to go back to Ted Smith on that. But John [T.] O'Connor and Gary Cohen were the two directors and they shared history going way back as childhood friends--through to college. But John had a sister, who--and I may be getting this completely wrong--who was out campaigning and doing a lot around the environment. And John was politically active as well, but his sister paid a heavy price. She was a very strong influence in his life. She was a very good organizer, but she died, I think, in a car accident, or in some way that was very, very unfortunate. And it saddened John very much. This is probably totally inaccurate, but out

of that, he stepped forward to continue her work and helped mobilize the communities and helped be a resource for them to address the issues of toxics in their communities.

And you know, John is from a white middle-class family--not a very wealthy family, but a middle-class family--and he was most comfortable and he did his best organizing in white middle-class communities. He built a good network of groups. It was a wonderful resource in getting media attention and financial attention from funders and things like that. And NTC helped found the West County Toxics [Coalition] and helped them with funding and getting started and gave them the basic tools. They did that for many organizations.

What had happened, though, was, with the summit and more attention in 1991 to issues of environmental justice, that foundations then started to designate funds to focusing on environmental justice issues. What the mistake was by the NTC--John and Gary--was to go after that money big time, and they got a starting grant of a quarter of a million dollars.

Wilmsen: So the summit kind of helped leverage funds for starting these kind of grassroots people of color organizations?

Lee: Right, right. And those funds should have been earmarked directly to groups like West County Toxics and others. But the NTC being, how do I say, more established, and a lot of the funders also being white--very wealthy--could relate better to Gary and John and their proposals, so that they gave the money to them. That caused a big uproar among the grass roots people of color organizations that were just starting. They would have to see if NTC would channel the funds to groups that needed it, you know, but what would really happen?

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: And it was discovered that most of it was going to go towards the general fund of NTC to fund what it was already doing.

Within the organization there was some--maybe three or four--people of color who thought that this was not quite right and said that something has to happen and more people need to be brought on from the communities of color to help address how to deal with this money. So Richard Moore, and myself, Peter Cervantes-Gautschi--. Who else was added? Pam Kingfisher. There were probably more people who were added onto the board.

Wilmsen: How were you recruited?

Lee: I was recruited, I think by Peter. Peter recommended me. Then I was called by the chairperson—oh, it was a wonderful woman; Kate Kyker. She was the chair. She was wonderful—from the South. Speaking with her, she was very genuine, and I decided that I would participate. She said that they wanted to diversify the board and also diversify their activities, and they sent me the bylaws, and I thought that, you know, it was a good thing to help do, so I participated. What happened was at my first meeting other people on the board—except the president who was this wonderful lady—[laughs] except for the other people of color, nobody would talk to me! It was very hostile!

Wilmsen: How come?

Lee: Well, at that time I didn't know. They were very threatened by these people of color coming. Oh, Ted [Smith] was on, and I had known Ted before, so he spoke to me. But I mean, you walk in the room and you could sit for a whole day, and you know, you'd go for break or lunch and people were just very rude to you and not talk to you. They would talk with themselves. And I said, "Wow, this is very very strange. What's going on here, you know, with the other people?" I came to understand that people were very threatened by us, and that somehow they were told that we were out to destroy the organization. And me, I knew nothing about the organization. I wouldn't even know how to destroy it. I didn't know anything about it.

But when we had a discussion among the new people on the board and the other people of color, our proposal for how to handle the money was that it should be earmarked for environmental justice. It was not to go into NTC's general funds. It was not to go to fund the same old things. And that we should open up the organization to views from the outside, and solicit ideas and fund grassroots communities of color to do work. But they did not necessarily have to join the NTC. As NTC, we would be a resource to help them.

Basically John and his people really did not like our idea at all. They wanted it to do what the NTC wanted it to do. They wanted any organizations that were going to get funding to join the NTC and be a part of the NTC network, and NTC would be deciding from the top down what people would be doing. So there's going to be a campaign around an incinerator in Alabama, all the organizations had to do a press conference, had to abide by the rules and [take] orders from the top to support them. And they saw that as perfectly reasonable.

And we saw that as perfectly not reasonable. It was very premature. People didn't know who NTC and these other people were. This money was earmarked for communities to be able to lift themselves up by themselves; that's what it should do. They should not have to abide by what the NTC said they had to do.

So that went on for, I think, almost three years, that struggle. And the hostilities--there was this interpersonal stuff that was going on. A group of women and other people just came--we were at a meeting place and there was a hot tub and people were in the hot tub, and all of a sudden an African American woman, older woman, came in from sitting with people in the hot tub in tears and trembling, and she went up to her room and slammed the door. As it turned out, she had been talking with this other woman from the South. It was a white woman who said she felt that the worst thing that had ever happened was the Civil Rights Movement, that African Americans were treated better before the Civil Rights Movement, that her grandfather and her father treated African Americans with compassion and kindness.

Wilmsen: The old paternalism argument.

Lee: And did not understand why it had to change. That was what was going on.

Wilmsen: This was another board member?

Lee: This was another board member. Other people on that board were predominantly white middle class, and they could not understand what the big problem was. "That's how she felt. You know, why couldn't she have that opinion?" You know, and it was just so counter against the experience of these African Americans who were living on toxic land and living in homes that they saved years and years for. Middle-class African Americans were being poisoned, and here this person was clueless about their experience of living under that paternalistic system and discrimination in the South. Oh, it was ugly. We had to have a vote to have the white woman leave the NTC. It was just a very, very sad ugly painful day. But we had the vote and we had to do it. Not much was learned by the NTC institution from that and similar incidents, and so about a year and a half later, the board voted to disband.

Wilmsen: When was that that you disbanded?

Lee: Oh, gee. I knew you were going to ask that.

Wilmsen: Approximately.

Lee: '93.

Wilmsen: Well, for at least the West County Toxics Coalition, the National Toxics Campaign got them going in about the early eighties.

Lee: Oh, yes.

Wilmsen: And then there was the Super Drive for Superfund.

Lee: Right.

Wilmsen: So there was kind of a long--

Lee: Yes, there was a long history with the West County Toxics and other groups.

Wilmsen: Yes, and a long history of working with communities of color, at least from what little I know.

Lee: For West County, but I think West County was maybe one of two or three organizations out of I don't know how many. West County was their model.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see.

Lee: It was one of the main ones. No, there wasn't a whole bunch of West Counties under NTC--no, no, no.

Wilmsen: Do you know what prompted them to start diversifying their board to begin with? Was it the leadership summit?

Lee: No. It was before that. They had individuals who were very nice older women who were on their board that they had come across and helped individually. Yes. Not every group that they helped, or every entity that helped, was a big organization. Some were individuals.

##

Wilmsen: Now, that letter from the Southwest Organizing Project to the Big Ten [national environmental groups] was sent somewhere around 1990.

Lee: Right, it was. Before the summit.

Wilmsen: Was that an influence? Did they send it to the NTC?

Lee: They sent it to the NTC, but NTC was not part of the Big Ten. They felt that NTC was much more grassroots. That's why people like Richard Moore, myself, and other folks joined the NTC.

Wilmsen: I see.

Lee: Yes. No, we didn't classify them as the same as the other Sierra Clubs and World Wildlife. No, no, no, we were trying to give them an opportunity to try to really work.

Wilmsen: Yes, so you were already on the board of NTC when that was sent?

Lee: No.

Wilmsen: No. Okay, so that came after.

Lee: I came on after that, yes. I think that letter helped somewhat with influencing NTC to say, "Yes, they should have more people on, and that, you know, what to do with this money--folks should help us decide that." Gary Cohen, I think, was really the main person to push that. Does that make sense to you now?

Wilmsen: Yes. So you weren't involved during that Super Drive Superfund?

Lee: No.

Wilmsen: That was earlier.

Lee: Yes. That was in the eighties, right?

Wilmsen: Right. '86. That culminated with the SARA--Superfund Amendment--

Lee: No, I was still a union organizer then.

### **The Effects of Activism on Family**

#### **Relationship with Parents and Extended Family**

Wilmsen: Right, okay. Well, do you want to talk a little bit about your family now?

Lee: Sure.

Wilmsen: You wrote me a note that you wanted to talk about the toll that your activism has taken on your family.

Lee: [laughs] Yes. Let's see. Where shall I start? On my mother's side, I had mentioned earlier that they have been here in the U.S. a much longer time. On my father's side there were new immigrants, although my father was born here. But I had mentioned earlier that the "Don't rock the boat" kind of philosophy was very, very strong, and it worked I think because Chinese in the United States was like less than a million people. There were not many of us at all. And I think that it was a little easier to have that kind of philosophy and struggle to assimilate. You can move around a lot more, you can be more mobile. But as the sixties came, more immigration opened up and there was much more Chinese people. For me going back to Chinatown, a very important component of my outlook was how Chinese were treated.

My family, though, had moved out, and so that wasn't much of an issue for them. The struggles around rent or garment or health care or how young people were treated--they were mobile and they could vote with their feet and they moved. They had the financial means. Then the Vietnam War stuff was, you know, also a hot topic at the dinner table. So when it came to holidays, just big fallout over, you know, "Why are you throwing these issues in our faces?" You know, they're not really that concerned about it. And even my grandmother, she didn't say too much, but she still lived in Chinatown. But the war, issues around the war, was very, very intense. And I've mentioned before that my uncle and my father had worked as part of the military complex stuff.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: So it took a real toll. I think I was estranged from my family--my parents and my uncles and aunts and grandparents--oh, I guess for a good seven years. And that kind of, how do you say, still shadows me. Today I mean, my parents and I are very, very close, but my relationships to my uncle and aunts could be a lot closer. But the differences--political differences--really made it very hard, and so I think they choose not to spend a lot of time with us--my husband and I. We just see things totally different. You know, if they're downsizing at the newspaper--they got rid of all the paper boys in San Francisco, and I thought that, "You know, that's kind of sad." A lot of these families need the kids to go out. And my relatives are, "As long as the paper is delivered, I don't care how it gets there." Okay, now I know to shut up. Before I would just argue them to death--[laughter]--and ruin yet another dinner.

But I think I shook off that assimilation stuff because I could see that as long as you're a person of color in this country, no matter how much you tried, unless something very socially drastically changed structurally, that we weren't going to be treated as equals. As a Chinese person, I will always feel a little alienated. And it feels badly, because, you know, I'm an American. I can never be Chinese. I can't go back to China: I don't speak the language, I'm just so culturally different from them. And then here I don't fit in either.

Sometimes people still say, "Wow, you speak English so well." Although I don't, but you know, I think they're talking about my accent. I don't have an accent--I do, but not what they think I should have. Well, people still say those kinds of things.

And I see today more hate crimes against not only Asians, but just this racial profile. Hate crimes against Asians keep rising every year. And in my family, except for my parents, they don't see that. My parents somewhat acknowledge it more, now, but the rest of my family--so you know, have these kinds of differences. And whenever you have differences--and I'm sure it happens to all families--it hurts, you know. There's a void there.

### **Activism and Marriage to Ben Lee**

Lee: And then with my husband and son, I met my husband through this political work. We both belonged to *I Wor Kuen*. He was a graduate of Berkeley.

Wilmsen: What's his name?

Lee: His name is Ben Lee. I think he graduated in '72, so he participated in all of the ethnic studies strikes and was one of the first student teachers here, and first community organizers in San Francisco Chinatown with the many others. And we met doing this work. When we got married, the year of our marriage was a big year.

The eviction of the International Hotel was that year and that was in August, and we were 5,000 people outside the hotel--my husband and I. I was one of the tactical squad in front of the hotel and my husband was on the roof across the street, tactical, with a walkie-talkie to tell some person in some truck [laughs] where the police were and when they were coming. We shared all of that.

That same year there was a huge shooting at a restaurant called Golden Dragon--a gang shooting. Many people died in the restaurant and so Chinatown was quiet. People wouldn't go outdoors. And my husband and I and a group of other folks were responsible for an upcoming film showing on the People's Republic of China at night in the park almost across the street from where this restaurant was. [laughs] So that was like, "Oh, are people going to come out? Are we going to watch this movie by ourselves?" [laughs]

And we made a big screen--I think I told you already--out of many, many sheets sewn together. And our friend Mark Peacock climbed up a flagpole and tied one end to it and

then climbed up some light pole and tied the other end and we had a makeshift theater in Portsmouth Square. My husband ran the projector and by the time the movie was to start, the whole park was filled. And it was a beautiful--it was October 1--and it was a beautiful summer-fall evening. People were in just their shirtsleeves, sitting on the grass, watching, I think, *The Red Detachment of Women*. [laughs] First time, first showing of *The Red Detachment of Women* in the United States.

Then that happened and my husband and I got married. As we both were doing our political work, women, I think, played a much more active leadership role. I think that men in this work have to undergo a lot more transformation in making themselves more group-thinking, able to participate with others, and to set back yourself to allow others to come forward. It's very hard for men. And in this work I think women step forward more. I don't know why, [laughs] but I think it's because of women's experiences in doing things together and allowing other people to shine, although I was a control freak in the beginning; I was not a very good organizer. But you know, it's an easier transformation for women to assume leadership and organize, and I think that took a toll on men. It is more difficult for them.

And for my husband it was very hard. There was a period of time where I was very disappointed, you know, and not just him but in many of the men not being able to, you know, be more open to change. I admired him for his independent thinking and I still do. He's very smart, much more politically clear than I am. His fallback was like many of the men, you know, just not able to work as well with others. So he left the work, and I think that that took a big toll on us because I remained very active. And it's not his fault. I mean, it was the political organization and demand that took a toll on our family. So we separated for about three years.

But we had our son together and so it was hard on all of us, especially I think for our son. I feel a lot of guilt around that, but after three years, I think things kind of just cooled down and we were able to find our bearings and we reunited as a family. So things worked out.

But this kind of work--I think for many active people, many can't get married, because they can't find anybody who, you know, will tolerate them. There are divorces, or there's some that can't/don't have children because it's just too difficult, or again, they separate because they have children and it's just not able to work out. It's very unfortunate in doing this work. For others that I know, it takes a toll on their health. They become very sick--the stress. Their families are fairly well intact, but the stress is physically demanding. So that's what I see in terms of the sacrifices people make. Our family was very lucky that we were able to come back together.

Wilmsen: What did your husband go into after he left the work?

Lee: He mainly focused on his work in the family. Yes. So he's very supportive of me, and never discourages me from doing anything, and I think that I am very lucky as a woman. Talking with other women, they don't have that kind of support as much as I do. And so I'm very fortunate. It can be very lonely doing this kind of work.

**Son, Dennis Lee**

Wilmsen: And how about your son? You said he's twenty-one? What's he doing?

Lee: Yes. He's twenty-one. Right now he's still living at home but he's not politically active. He's very wise about this stuff. He's seen a lot of things. And I think that because he came with me to so many demonstrations, he's participated in activities where he was with Mom and others. For example, one time we were building statues in the middle of the night to protest the anti-union Fog City Diner on the shores of the bay. As you're going onto the Bay Bridge (that was before you moved here) people used to be able to build protest signs along the Emeryville Bay shoreline. He was a little boy, he sat there and say, "Mom, is this legal?" [laughter] "Can you do this, Mom?" He's been in so many situations like that where I said, "Well, it's legal, but it's not legal. It's legal because, you know, to be able to say what you feel about how workers are treated, that's legal, but to build a protest sign here might not be legal." So he's been in many situations like that.

He's heard stories of people who have been affected by the system, and I never discouraged him from hearing any of that stuff. He's seen people do alternative living styles--having alternative lifestyles, whether it's like marijuana--marijuana for medicine or marijuana for entertainment. He's seen alternative culture in terms of music. People really tried to create their own music--Asian American jazz or whatever. He's seen all of that, experienced all of that, so as a result he's much more wise than others his age. But he's still very young. He found his schoolmates rather immature, could not really relate to them, nor they relate to him, although he's very funny so people like him a lot. But he chose not to hang around a lot of the kids. So it has that kind of an influence on people, on the young, and I was not able to help him channel that into productive energies. So you know, he's not as active.

Wilmsen: Would you say he leans more to the left or more to the right? Because so often kids go the opposite direction of their parents.

Lee: Exactly. No, he's odd. I think that young people now are very cynical. They're all very cynical. Not all--many. But he is very open-minded, so he's not rightist. He's not to the right. But he will think and he will ask very good questions, so if you say something, he will come back with a question that will demand a real good explanation of why. And if you give him one that's a little shallow, he'll tell you that he thinks it's shallow. So that for him is how it's reflected. He's not that—*All in the Family* or whatever, where they, it was something where the kids come out really conservative. He's much more--

Wilmsen: Oh yes, that was the one with David Fox.

Lee: Yes. Michael Fox.

Wilmsen: Michael Fox, yes.

Lee: Yes, he's much more thoughtful, and so if you come at him with a shallow explanation, he'll see through you. Very demanding.

Wilmsen: Okay. How late do you want to go today?

Lee: I think that's about it. Don't you? [laughter] I've been talking with you for two hours.

Wilmsen: Great.

### Work at UC Berkeley's Labor Occupational Health Program

[Interview 4: August 5, 2000] ##

Wilmsen: Today is August 5, 2000, and this is the fourth interview with Pam Tau Lee. Okay, we were just saying that we were going to talk about your job here at UC Berkeley, and you mentioned that you had refreshed your memory about community-based research and how that ties in with academics. Do you want to just talk?

Lee: Sure, I can. Many of the projects that I head up here entail participation from either the workers or grassroots organizers and activists that are working on issues of protection of the environment and people's health, and also looking towards what is sustainability for the future.

The populations, as I mentioned earlier, would be workers and immigrant workers, union workers, and my particular focus has been workers who had been traditionally locked out--immigrant workers of color, women--from being able to have a voice.

Grassroots environmental justice networks is the other arena in which I focus my attention, and that is primarily grassroots activists and residents that have been living outside of polluting facilities or have been infected by, you know, the degradation of their environment.

So my primary focus here is being able to use our organization here at UC Berkeley, the Labor Occupational Health Program with the School of Public Health, to help facilitate access to information, access to resources--whether it be financial resources or academic research resources: data--and to also help facilitate the building of concrete ties so that the impacted can actually participate, have a voice in the decision and the direction, and also gain concrete benefit from the relationship. It could be done through arenas of training, policy, research--a variety of avenues.

Wilmsen: Those are relationships between workers and their employers?

Lee: Yes. It could be workers and their employers, or it could be the relationship between workers and communities that are impacted by what workers do.

### **Community-based Research with a Hotel Workers Union**

### **Facilitating Partnerships between Academics and Workers**

Wilmsen: What kind of community-based research do you do?

Lee: Well, there's a few angles. One community-based research project had to do with hotel workers. Did I talk about this earlier, before?

Wilmsen: Tell me a little bit more about it.

Lee: Okay, it was the San Francisco room cleaners, predominantly immigrant women in the service industry.

Wilmsen: You talked about organizing in the Tenderloin.

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: Is that the same thing?

Lee: No, it's different.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: So this is developing a partnership between the workers, their union, and academic researchers on campus.

Wilmsen: Oh, okay.

Lee: And that partnership developed a research project that can address the health of the room cleaners. We helped facilitate and direct that, and I think we learned a great deal in how it is important to have a third party there to help with the differences in language, and how people understand what research is and approaches, and the different needs on both sides.

That facilitation, I think, is one contribution that the university can provide. In this particular project the union made it very clear that they wanted to understand the health status of their workers. The workers are immigrant workers, women, and an aging work force who were experiencing additions to their work load. They were seeing a higher incidence of injuries and illnesses among their workers and turned to us for help on this. The union did not have the skill or expertise that they needed to document the problem and bring this to the employers. They wanted something scientific, but also they wanted a process that their workers could direct and benefit from. I had access to researchers on campus who I knew appreciated that approach, and also who were interested in advancing their careers in issues of worker health and safety, and also wanted to do more research to, you know, advance their resumes and their experience. They also wanted to assist.

So it was being able to identify those people on campus, and through networking with the individuals in the School of Public Health I was able to identify one particular person, Niklas Krause, who I set up an appointment with and discussed the possibilities and opportunities. He was very open, and we then talked to the union to get a better concrete idea of what they meant by worker participation, what they meant by scientific, and how they would react if the research produced negative results. They had to know that when they're dealing with academics, that they can't change and alter the results, you know, but though there is no real thing as neutral research, it has to be able to meet scientific criteria.

But the union understood that and trusted us to be able to set up the collaboration with communications and a structure and a process that would be respectful.

Wilmsen: Now, what union did you say this was?

Lee: This was the Hotel Employees, Restaurant Employees, Local 2 in San Francisco.

Wilmsen: Okay. The same one you worked for, right?

Lee: Yes. So I got the parties together, and I encouraged them to talk to each other about their backgrounds and their approaches, encouraged them to question each other on what certain words meant to each other, and to share, you know, their concerns, and help them put down in writing what an agreement should look like with this partnership.

That doesn't happen all at one time. People need time to trust each other and to see each other at work, and get familiar through the process. I feel that when communities work with the academics, that they should really feel the entitlement to sit down and work out agreements of accountability, process, and communication.

I helped make sure that happened. I think it worked out pretty well.

Wilmsen: Did you draw up a written agreement?

Lee: Not necessarily--maybe we did draw up some written agreements, but it was very clear in each other's heads, you know, what was expected of both sides. The academics needed to expect cooperation from the union in terms of, you know, turnout and cooperation in terms of response when they sent faxes to review different tools, survey tools, or whatever. That they had those needs as well.

Then part of the written agreement, or verbal agreement, was what to do with the information. The union felt very comfortable that the university would have the data and that the university would have the name on the report and can use that to be able to publish for future work. They felt comfortable after working with Niklas and observing how the researchers interacted. And I think that that kind of agreement needs to be spelled out.

At different times researchers may want to publish. I think the community should have the rights to review first and have veto or input into what gets published, and also gets credit. The union in this instance was not that interested; they didn't really care. Their main thing was that they wanted the research findings and they wanted the researchers to present the findings to the employers. And the researchers were quite comfortable in

doing that. So that, I think, was very a good process. I would encourage the university to play more of a role in this kind of research.

And in the funding: when the academics get funding to do this work--in this instance, the union had the funding, so they had the purse strings on this, but it usually would be the university who would get awarded the resources. I have advocated on a national level and in other arenas where I'm working with the Indigenous Network or the Southwest Network or with the Asian Network in some of this work with money from the EPA or the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, that agreements be made on not only the process, communication, and what to do with the product and also the credit to the community involvement, but there be a sharing of the resources.

### **Training and Sharing of Risks**

Lee: We spent a lot of our resources in the hotel training and in other work on things like interpretation, the purchasing of translation equipment, materials being available, and if they had to be rewritten in common-sense English, making sure that that happened. Then making sure that if community participants have to take time off from work to attend meetings and things like that, that there are resources that enable them to come to Berkeley to participate in workshops, to get trained so they can interpret the data, or get the skills to be able to participate as equals. Those resources need to be shared and made available by the academics. The academics should readily understand the need for that. Too often, in many of these projects they expect the community to participate for free, because they assume that, well, this is going to help the community, so that they're going to get healthier, so they should participate for free. I don't think that one should make that assumption.

I think that if there is a benefit to this, that there should be something concrete for the community. If there's a benefit in terms of something written, that the community is acknowledged for their role. If there's a risk that's going to be taken, that the academics also share in that risk, and so that there is a true sharing here.

Wilmsen: Yes. Were there risks to the workers in this particular study?

Lee: Yes, there was job fear to participate. There were risks for the workers to do the organizing at the worksite, to recruit co-workers to take the survey and to have them meet downstairs at the employee entrance and go together to the survey site.

The academics need to understand the risk that workers take, and to weave into the training and to the whole process a way that workers feel very comfortable. And so what we wove in was a series of trainings before that so that people could role play and work with the academics in terms of how they were going to work their list of names and to check people off who agreed to participate in the survey. They had the skills to mobilize. And researchers need to take that time to train the workers. That's two weeks of time. You know, it slows down the process, but they have to take that time and share that risk with the workers. So we were very, very fortunate to find researchers on campus who, you know, would agree to that. That's very hard to find, actually.

Wilmsen: Are they concerned about that process affecting the data that's collected?

Lee: I think that how they dealt with that concern about the data that they would get, is they made it very clear to the union what the challenges would be to the data collection if there was not good participation rates. Because we had 70 percent and above participation rates, that made the data very solid.

Wilmsen: Oh, I see. Who actually did the interviewing? Did you train workers to interview workers?

Lee: Yes. We spent about three weeks--again, because you could only meet once a week, two hours at a time, with women who have to go home and cook and do everything else after eight hours.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: So we set up a training that went over the survey tool and then helped them understand why certain questions were asked in the way they were, and how people check it off. And they actually learned that by doing the survey themselves. We didn't use that data. You couldn't use that data, but they went through the questions themselves and then circled the questions that they had a hard time understanding. Then we went through each one of those questions to explain why we asked it that way and, yes, it's such a stupid way to ask that question, but that's--[laughs]--you know, and that, yes, we asked it earlier, but when you do a research tool, you have to ask the same question two or three times to make sure that people answer consistently. So they got insight in terms of how surveys are made.

Then the second time we trained them on what their role would be, and we role-played coming in, how people would sign in, be seated, what I would do up front to give directions, and then what their role would be, and so they practiced with each other on how to do that.

And then the next time they practiced being at a table of room cleaners and people struggling to fill out the survey, and what they could do and what they could not do. So that was the work.

The academics helped us a lot in being able to design what people needed to understand. And then we, because we are trainers, could take that then and do it in a way that people could learn by doing hands-on. It was very participatory and interactive and dealt with the three languages. The survey researchers needed to be able to speak Spanish-English, Chinese-English, Tagalog-English. Yes.

### Outcomes of the Research

Wilmsen: What was the outcome of the survey?

Lee: The outcome was that it was found, in using traditional question methods, that room cleaners' health was far below the average in terms of the national average for workers' health. Room cleaners experience a high degree of stress on the job. There are physically, in terms of the ergonomic, the physical health, high rates of injuries and illnesses as well. It was able to document, in terms of the kinds of jobs that they were doing, what particular work was causing them difficulties. And the end result was the room cleaners participated in negotiations that happened at the end of the project.

The researchers went in with their report, with their overheads, presented to the whole group of about 100 people--employers, general managers, human resource people and the union workers--presented their findings and then went into a meeting with the employers themselves where they got grilled by the employers as to the research methods and the findings and the interpretation of the findings. Then that afternoon the room cleaners took over and presented their own testimony and presented their own case.

The result was the room cleaners won a significant reduction in their work load. San Francisco room cleaners have the best housekeeping work load language in the world. [laughs] Yes. Significant impact. It will set the standard nationally.

The researchers gained a tremendous amount from this relationship in how to work with workers in doing participatory research. They presented raw data to me. Then I took that raw data and turned it into a working session with the room cleaners, and the academics came. I presented the raw data to the room cleaners and then divided them into different small groups to deal with certain aspects of the raw data that the academics did

not understand. Then the room cleaners discussed the data and came back to the whole group and presented what they felt the data showed.

And it was just I think--it was only supposed to be a three-hour meeting, it went four and a half hours and nobody wanted to leave. The only reason why the workers had to leave was because children had to be picked up from child care. The researchers were engaged and also didn't want to leave--thought this was the greatest thing since apple pie. The room cleaners didn't want to leave either because they just had so much to share in terms of, you know, what this information meant. They also offered things like, "Can you break out the data across all ages, or across this or whatever?" And the researchers said, "Oh, yes, we can." And then they would tell them, "Well, I'll bet you find blah blah blah." It was just such a rich meeting. I don't think that anybody will forget that. All of that was incorporated in the final report.

Wilmsen: Now, does this study have a name?

Lee: Yes, it has a name. [laughs] It's titled "Working Conditions and Health of San Francisco Hotel Room Cleaners."

I guess in a nutshell, for the role of academics, they should agree to some kind of an agreement: what to do with the written materials, a commitment to involving the impacted in terms of understanding how to participate, give them the skills and knowledge of how to participate, involve them in interpretation of the data or in decision-making in terms of recommendations. There should be concrete benefit to the community, shared resources, and shared benefits and risks.

### **Obstacles to Community-based Research: University and Foundation Priorities**

Wilmsen: This kind of sounds like it could serve as a model for academicians doing participatory research.

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: And one of the questions I had for you was what role do you see for the university in kind of helping with labor issues and environmental justice issues. And this, I think, is part of the answer to that question.

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: But what obstacles do you see to this kind of a thing being done by other academicians or in other disciplines?

Lee: Yes, I think that some of the challenges--we are a community service under the School of Public Health, and I think that the university doesn't understand the role that groups like us can do to help facilitate better interaction. Because I think that people come from such different worlds and perspectives and understandings and interests and needs that it's very rough going to just sit down in a room and start to pound out, you know, what can be done. And it adds a lot of frustration and anger on both sides.

Wilmsen: Yes.

Lee: I think that if a university can recognize that and build that in as an approach, that part of their role would be to have some of their community outreach groups be a facilitation tool. The trend is so much towards, you know, funding by private corporations that it's very difficult to have that accountability to labor and to the community residents, and environmental justice communities, and to recognize that so much of their agenda is driven by corporate interests.

I think that in the past we've had chancellors and directors of the School of Public Health that are more aware of that than others. I know that Chancellor [Chang-Lin] Tien, for example, his daughter graduated from the School of Public Health, so he was very understanding of where we were coming from. And though he was very good at getting corporate funding, I think that he also went out of his way--but I can't be very concrete--but was very open to having the university play this kind of a role.

So that's another big challenge, is the drive on campuses now to get private funding, and the problems that that causes.

Wilmsen: What about foundations? Do you think that they're more inclined to--or is that what you meant by corporate funding?

Lee: Yes. There are a lot of big foundations, too, that are affected by this. There is, within the funding world, environmental justice funders who try to enlighten the big foundations. In fact, I think it's the Ford Foundation that has just hired an environmental justice program officer who comes from the movement and actually she's with me [in this picture], Vernice Miller. She's with me here in South Africa [points to picture]. But she just started work last week and I think that actions like that to hire people from the community with experience and expertise like Vernice has is a good thing.

Another big challenge from the university is environmental justice. Not so much now, but in the beginning, a lot of money was being geared towards that, and I think I mentioned before that many universities were trying to apply for that money to do the same work that they were traditionally doing.

Wilmsen: This was foundation money?

Lee: Foundation money or government money. NIEHS [National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences], the EPA, had a lot of community-university partnership grants, and they still do.

Wilmsen: Which are the foundations that you mentioned that are funders of environmental justice?

Lee: I could get a better list, but one that just happened is the Ford Foundation. Yes. I don't want to name others because I may get them wrong.

Wilmsen: Okay.

Lee: There is a workplace giving that has--

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Lee: --traditionally given money to the white mainstream environmentalist organizations, but had a discussion among themselves on their board to say, "Well, you know, there is more here. We should make some of this accessible to the environmental justice communities," and for the past four years has helped facilitate the Environmental Justice Workplace Giving Fund that is part of Earthshare. And so that is also a very good move in terms of funding opportunities.

But at the universities, you will have a lot of environmental work around pesticides or other toxins or other issues, and their relationship to the community would be mainly just to set up an advisory board that has no decision-making power, and to maybe have them rubberstamp what they're doing. There's no skill-building. There's no guarantee of benefit to them. No sharing of resources. There's not likely to be any [language] translation. They'll probably set meetings up during the day when people can't come. Things like that. And so the public participation there, they just don't get it. So I think those are some of the highlights. The concern is with the publishing of their results, getting tenure, and getting national attention. And mainly maintaining their institution is what's the driving force there. It's very unfortunate.

### The Challenge to Unions

Wilmsen: Yes. How about on the union side? Is that pretty typical of the way the unions are handling occupational health now?

Lee: Unions used to have a lot more resources directed towards occupational health and safety, but the politics in this country has changed so much that the gap between the rich and poor is getting very great. The move to privatize a lot of government services, whether it's transportation, health care, whatever, is so great, the union labor movement is really needing to go on the offensive to organize. Work around health and safety has dropped off quite a bit. They're not recognizing this as an organizing opportunity. Health and safety departments where the service employees in a region might have had ten designated people working on health issues, now you might have one--if even one. The national offices used to have like twenty-five--a crew of twenty-five--to help their international locals throughout the U.S. or Canada, maybe they'll have two or three now. So they have needed to shift their attention to organizing and figuring out a way to go on the offensive to address issues of global economy, privatization, downsizing, things like that.

So the role that we play--we have been called more to help [union] local[s] or regional [divisions] to develop strategic plans to address this, because they just can't get the resources from within any more.

Wilmsen: Now, earlier you talked about how it was a struggle to get more people of color on union boards. How is the trend towards privatization affecting that, if at all?

Lee: The internal union leadership work, I think, is much better now on the national model. The AFL-CIO has diversified their leadership quite a bit. There's a lot more women, and there's a lot more people of color in visible leadership positions, although the head of the AFL-CIO is still an older white man. [laughs] But his track record in terms of the local work that he did within the Service Employees Union is very strong in diversification. So that's a little separate than the trend towards privatization and the going on the offense.

I think that if you look back on transportation workers--in public transportation, for example--before World War II, that was a very high-skilled, very respected industry and it was part of the government--that along with post office--that you really respected. You used to leave gifts out for your postman, and do things like that. After World War II, you see, as people were coming back from the war, a lot more African Americans were being hired into these jobs, and I think you will find a correlation in terms of the worsening of benefits, worsening of working conditions, and more of a trend towards privatization. The craft itself is not given as much respect any more, and drivers in San Francisco feel that,

you know, that a lot of the attacks--they are physically attacked and verbally abused daily--happen because they are predominantly workers of color and women. And the public can get away with this and treat them like this, and the media can get away with stereotyping them as not very smart and open to abuse, and not worthy of having decent working conditions.

A fellow who is working now with the AFL-CIO, Andy Banks, is one person who comes out of academic and union backgrounds that I think has documented this in terms of public transportation. So that is what I see. I don't know if that answered your questions. [laughter]

Wilmsen: Yes, it did. So what else? Is there anything else about your job here that you want to talk about? Any other particular subjects you've worked on?

Lee: I think those are the main ones, right now. The particulars about my job: I just love coming to work every day and having the opportunity to have a very hands-on relationship with workers and with communities who are directly impacted, and having the opportunity to work with people not only in this office who are brilliant and are dedicated, but on the national level with leaders who are genuine, committed, very smart, and want to create a movement from the bottom up to result in real fundamental social change in this country. So that is why I just love having this opportunity to deal head-on with social forces, political forces, economic forces that I feel are very central to the future of this country. Although we may just appear to be just a little health and safety program--I just did training with janitors yesterday and they walked in; they left saying, "Gee! You know, I didn't know this topic could be so powerful!" [laughs] And they were just genuinely excited to get back into their union meetings and go out there and protect their co-workers. So those kinds of opportunities and reinforcement make me very happy.

### The California Comparative Risk Project

Wilmsen: Shall we move on to your national work?

Lee: Sure.

Wilmsen: Actually, the first thing I think was on the state level: the California Comparative Risk Project.

Lee: Oh, yes.

Wilmsen: You loaned me the final report on that, and you were on the environmental justice committee.<sup>1</sup>

Lee: Yes.

Wilmsen: Can you tell me about that?

Lee: Yes, the state had made plans to develop this risk assessment. I think it was under Governor [Pete] Wilson.

The intention of that program, I think, was to create a process to make it easier for the corporations to get their permits at a one-stop shop and be able to facilitate easier the permit application, but also to try to get around some of the risk assessment requirements. So as a part of this project, I was invited as well as people like Carl Anthony and Bob Bullard and others to participate, and we were assigned to the environmental justice committee.

And I don't know what they were thinking about when they created this committee, [laughs] but because the national attention towards disparate health impacts was so great, they felt obligated to form this committee. So we got together and discussed what the environmental justice committee would be doing with all of these other people, and we made it very clear that we just didn't want to rubberstamp a process that was already going to be happening.

What we wanted to do was to have the environmental justice perspective be more a part of all of the committee work: the education, the public risk, all of the different components of this. And we got challenged or, you know, blocked by many of the more corporate participants who were not wanting us to get involved in any other committees. They actually challenged the health department and the state EPA as to why we should even be a committee, that there was no reason for us to actually have a say in this process.

There were interesting discussions in our group. Many of us had no idea what risk assessment was. [laughs] So we had to invite some of our colleagues from the universities to come in and educate us on what that was. Then we had discussions among ourselves as to what an environmental justice perspective would be on this. And the report I think is a good reflection of our effort. We did, I think, a good job in shedding light on the need to go beyond just statewide assessments, and to focus in on what we call hot spots, or areas where there is disproportionate impact. And I think we did a pretty

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<sup>1</sup>California Comparative Risk Project, "Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Planning for the Protection of California's Environment." (Sacramento, CA: Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, 1994)

good job in stating that we felt that resources should be looking at prevention as the first step--pollution prevention methods and things like that--because if there is a risk, our communities would probably experience it more than others.

After that was sent in there was great debate on the statewide steering committee. I did not attend those, but I understand people did not want our report to be a part of the overall report and encouraged that it not be in it at all, or if it was, it be attached as a minority report--from the minorities, I guess. [laughter] But they lost that and we became part of the overall report.

Wilmsen: Do you know how that was overcome, that objection to having it in the report?

Lee: I really don't know. I don't know how that happened. We had some very strong voices on the statewide. Carl Anthony was one of them, and Jack Chin, who is now the chair of the APEN, Asian Pacific Environmental Network. He was also on the statewide. And there were others like him who were very articulate, and I think that that's how it happened. So I think if you look for this report now you probably won't be able to find it. The overall risk assessment report anywhere in this state after--

Wilmsen: It's in the School of Public Health Library.

Lee: That's good.

Wilmsen: It's at least there. [laughter]

Lee: It's at least there. That's very good. Because I think the head of the project had to resign from heading that anymore because he was very upset that it wasn't going to be distributed and utilized within the state EPA. I think he resigned his position. Didn't resign from his job with the state, but from that project.

Wilmsen: Who was that? It probably says on the report.

Lee: Yes, I think it's Demetrious or something like--<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The project director was Michael DiBartolomeis, Senior Toxicologist, Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment.

**President Clinton's Executive Order on Environmental Justice**

Wilmsen: Yes. I'll look on the report. Okay. What effect, if any, did President Clinton's executive order on environmental justice in 1994 have on your work?

Lee: I think that President Clinton's order had a very big impact. Many people want it to be more, but there is no way that it was going to become law. But that executive order I think gave the movement an opportunity to advocate the formation of a national environmental justice advisory committee within the EPA. It enabled the White House to call an interagency body to regularly discuss this. It's not like spectacular changes were made, but I think that it has made a difference that enabled the community-university partnership grants to happen within the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

And oh, gosh, who is in charge of that? Dr. Ken Olden was very instrumental in getting through his agency a national conference--he's the head of NIEHS--a national conference on environmental justice that I think really had an impact. And through that process he met with environmental justice leaders and, in particular, Bob Bullard, Charles Lee, Richard Moore, and others--Vernice Miller--and learned a lot and to this day is a very strong advocate in promoting resources and benefits our way.

So I think that though it's not law, and it could under Gore disappear and for sure under Bush will be gone, it channeled resources--not enough, of course--but it channeled resources that were not there before. It opened up also foundations to be much more ready to diversify their boards and open up staff and channel money as well. So I think for all its shortcomings, that, you know, people might have of Clinton, this was very good.

Wilmsen: How did you get involved in the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council?

Lee: I was invited. Well, I think it's because I've been involved with this for a while. In the area of workplace health and safety and enforcement I am sort of recognized for that work, and as a result, the EPA staff when they made their list had been encouraged, I think by others, to include me.

At NIOSH, Dr. Linda Rosenstock appointed me to the NORA committee. It's the occupational research agenda, National Occupational Research Agenda.

Wilmsen: So on the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, what kind of work have you done for them?

Lee: It was two committees that I sat on. I had two terms that I was appointed to. One was an enforcement, and the other was public participation. I think under public participation there is a product that came out of there that I think is an excellent model that should be a resource for the academics as a protocol involving communities in these kinds of ventures with the government. I'm very proud of the work that that committee did, which was headed by Peggy Saika.

Wilmsen: Also of APEN.

Lee: Yes. Under enforcement we paid a lot of attention towards getting farmworker voice and perspective on pesticides. I think as a result of that, more resources were geared towards pesticide training of farmworkers as well as recommendations in terms of labeling and things like that. There needs to be more done in the area of enforcement of worker rights, but that committee did pretty well.

Wilmsen: And what have you done for the NORA committee?

Lee: Well, the NORA committee is a little more difficult. I think that, different from the EPA, there is much less grassroots participation. I'm the only one of the special populations that participates actively. Most everybody else are full-fledged researchers and academics, or doctors, physicians.

Wilmsen: Why do you think that is?

Lee: I don't think that enough attention has been channeled from the grassroots for accountability there. And I hope that at the upcoming tenth anniversary of the people of color summit that we can develop more of a strategic plan. This is a lesson learned over the last ten years. There's not enough in terms of worker health, and so my contributions there have not been, I think, as fruitful for me because there's a big gap between communication between the academics and the grassroots. For me, in my participation on there I'm not given any support in terms of what kinds of structures there are, their methods, their process, their networks. You know, the informal and formal networks are not accessible. So it's not been very satisfying. But I think it's more of an institutional thing, that we, as a movement, need to pay more attention to how to change that.

Wilmsen: How about individual members of the committee? Are they open to your kind of promoting participatory research?

Lee: I think one. But when we talk about this--and I've raised it to Dr. Rosenstock as well--that she is under pressure from the other research, more established arms, that this is not a

valid method of research. So this fall I hope to write a paper to present at APHA that, you know, that kind of challenges them on that.

Wilmsen: What's APHA?

Lee: The American Public Health Association. And draw on the housekeeping and other experiences.

So other national work that I'm involved in right now is to prepare for the next people of color leadership summit. Leaders from across the country will be there, and there will be global representation as well. Very complicated. I was on a two-hour phone call this morning sort of planning how to begin this process. There are so many different elements of bringing together people and identifying the importance of communications and process. It's with people with very, very different cultural experiences, very, very different ways of communication and understanding and language, so I think that the next period of time will be quite challenging.

But it's important because we need to form a united front in order to have capacity on a global level to deal with the issues of environmental degradation and poverty and health that we have a responsibility to do.

Wilmsen: Okay. Getting back to developing the model plan for public participation, what were some of your major challenges and opportunities in developing that?

Lee: Well, I think that this particular subcommittee was made up of people from industry and academics and grassroots that shared like minds. So in terms of challenges, actually there was not that much real sharp debate on issues. I think that everybody was there with an understanding that we must create some kind of a program protocol that will enable impacted communities to participate. And so, you know, even the representatives from waste management and folks--although, you know, they weren't that happy and I don't know if they will ever follow or advocate the protocol, [laughs], or that it made total sense [to them] in terms of the things being recommended. So yes, that was one that even industry couldn't really, I guess, turn back on.

### Current Perspective on the Mainstream Environmental and Environmental Justice Movements

Wilmsen: Okay. So I want to ask you about your current perspectives on the environmental movement, also. We've kind of touched on this throughout all our interviews, but right now what do you see as the points of convergence and divergence between the so-called mainstream environmental movement and the environmental justice movement?

##

Lee: I think one of the major points that will need to be addressed in the next ten to twenty years is the role of the impacted communities: people, families, and the resources, the knowledge, the skills, the decision-making power. What will that look like? You know, should they even have a role? And how will partnerships--even adversarial partners--be able to come together to communicate and problem-solve together? What is the role of academics? What are the roles of researchers? What is the role of lawyers? What is the role of government--politicians or government employees?

Each does not have the answer unto themselves. I think the traditional method would be to communicate among themselves, but the community piece there is not as clear-cut. Those networks, those informal networks are just not there. And whether or not they should be there is an issue. Even in planning for this upcoming summit, you know, what is the role of the academics? There's tension within the environmental justice movement, too, about their role and how resources are divvied out and technical assistance made available. So I think that will be one challenge.

The other is what kind of challenge to industry will the environmental justice movement make? Because as in the past, industry has tried to co-opt the movement by opening their boards or making available funds and finding ways to dissipate attention to their agenda. And I foresee that the mainstream environmental groups will be uncomfortable with the aggressive stance that the environmental justice movement will take on not only a local, in the U.S., but on a global scale.

Wilmsen: Why do you think that is?

Lee: I think many of the mainstream organizations, you know, they don't focus on people. They focus on the ecology and other natural resources. So they can get more, I think, opportunities to work with industry on those issues than they do in terms of dioxin in the rivers that Native Americans fish from or communities live next to or that kind of a thing. The politics are very different.

Wilmsen: So what do you think is the role for environmental justice groups?

Lee: I think in this next period we need to do some kind of a global and U.S. analysis. I think with that analysis we need to do better political education of activists, organizers, and impacted communities. I think that the political education needs to also sharpen their skills in terms of an economic understanding of what's going on. And the political education must provide a knowledge of the role of themselves in the future. I think that there must be alliances made with other sectors, such as the labor movement, and others like grassroots white environmental groups. I think that wherever possible, we must begin to also explore alliances with poor whites, like in the Appalachians and other Southern towns and other places that have been impacted as well. So we need to start to face up to those alliances as well.

Internally, within the environmental justice movement, one sector that we need to direct skills to and give a voice to is the youth. I think the young people not only in the high schools but the college age and the young worker age, we need to give them the opportunity to develop and to grow and to have a voice and to be able to articulate in their own way their issues and to mobilize and organize among themselves. You can just see in the recent WTO, World Trade Organization, organizing activities the role of the young people. It's very powerful. And within the environmental justice movement, we have young people as well, but they are not given enough opportunities to articulate their own views and message and they need resources to organize. So that I feel is another big challenge that needs to happen.

Wilmsen: Now you mentioned that there's disagreement, or not total agreement, in the environmental justice movement as to what its role is?

Lee: Yes. I think that in the next period of time we will start to get more clear. That's why we are planning. We are starting now. We're going to be meeting once a month, a crew of about forty from across the country and some international representatives, to plan for next year.

And what will that next year's gathering look like? Will it be a smaller scale strategic planning, to plan for a larger strategy, or will it be between now and then many series of regional meetings and dialogues to bring together a larger number next year? We have to make an assessment now of what the political landscape is. And the various environmental justice networks are currently doing self-assessments, and will share those self-assessments. So it will be integrating those two things to kind of give us direction of how we will all come together and hopefully come out with one common unified position with many probably minority, appendix, positions. [laughter]

Wilmsen: What are some of the points where people disagree?

Lee: I don't know yet.

Wilmsen: Oh, you don't know yet. Okay.

Lee: This morning we were just talking about ground rules, how people will meet each other. [laughs]

Wilmsen: What role do you see for the mainstream environmental movement?

Lee: For the mainstream environmental organizations, they should lend support and resources, don't get in the way, allow the environmental justice organizations to dialogue. They should not get defensive. They should be confident that we're not out to demolish them. What we've set out to do, I think, is just to identify more of a view and the strategic plan that we hope that they will understand and contribute to, you know. So I think that that is one of the main things.

In dealing with groups, just like when you deal with the issue of race in this country, many white people just get very defensive, and they don't have to. I think when people recognize that the history of racism is everybody's history and will acknowledge that it's everybody's history, I think that that goes a long way in terms of cooperation. And that future I guess depends on being able to share and come up with solutions that really are to the benefit of the whole. Going along with the defensiveness are statements like, "Well, that happened before I was born, and I didn't know anything about that," and, you know, "No, we don't benefit. I don't benefit from any of this." You know, that is just not true.

Things like affirmative action, well, that's one piece, but also when you're talking about the global environment, we're all going to have to be open to living with less. The West and the North consumes so much of the world's resources and enjoys the benefits at the expense of the South that everybody is just going to have to really face up to that and stop being so individual. But that's going to take a tremendous amount of change on many levels, and I don't think it's going to come easy, and it's not going to come without a lot of conflict.

Wilmsen: Do you think that people in the mainstream movement are trying to reach out to people in the environmental justice movement or vice versa? Or what's going on there?

Lee: I don't think that they're trying to reach out now, no. I think that in the beginning, I think around '95, there was much more reaching out, but not genuine. I think there's less now.

But you know, we hope that we can put that back on their agenda soon, in the next five years.

Wilmsen: Why do you think there's less now?

Lee: I think because the environmental justice movement needs to come together and articulate a strong message again. Yes. If we're not around, they're not going to pay attention, because there's nothing to hear. [laughs]

Wilmsen: Are you serving on any environmental group boards now?

Lee: I am on the APEN board, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network board. I work very close with both the Southwest Network and the Indigenous Environmental Network. And then those government agency national boards. I think that's it.

Wilmsen: Sounds like enough. Okay, is there anything else you want to talk about?

Lee: No. I don't think so. If there is, I'll let you know, but right now, I'm kind of reflecting on many of my friends that I've lost in the last ten years who have died, who were wonderful environmental justice leaders. I guess that that comes as a part of this work: the wonderful friendships that you make and then the terrible loss that you feel when they're gone because of their poor health, and the sacrifice they made physically to this work. So I think that's what's on my mind right now.

Wilmsen: That's understandable. Is there any topic you want to go back to?

Lee: No, not right now.

Wilmsen: Okay, I guess that's a good place to stop, then.

Transcriber: Amelia Archer

Final Typist: Steve Stine



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**—EDUCATION—**

**Secondary Education Teacher Post Graduate Program**  
California State University at Hayward Teacher Corps, 1972

**Bachelor of Science, Sociology**  
California State University Hayward, 1970

**—PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE—**

**Labor Coordinator**  
November, 1990—present

**Labor Occupational Health Program, School of Public Health,  
University of California at Berkeley**

Direct and coordinate participatory research with unions and researchers. Provide training, technical assistance, develop materials, plan conferences, facilitate joint labor-management problem solving groups. Coordinate outreach and program development to labor, community and environmental justice groups.

**Facilitator**  
February, 1994—present

**San Francisco Hotel Partnership Project**  
San Francisco

Provide facilitation, training, evaluation and research assistance to the city joint labor management problem solving project. Served as acting coordinator of the project from January to March 1995.

**Instructor**  
Spring, 1995—present

**San Francisco City College**  
San Francisco

Instructor in the Labor Studies Department.

**Staff Director****June, 1985—November, 1990****Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees Union Local 2  
AFL-CIO, San Francisco**

Supervised field representatives responsible for servicing union hotels in San Francisco. Responsible for shop steward and committee training and development programs. Administered programs to service hotels units, developed union labor policies, contract negotiations, community relations.

**—PRESENTATIONS—**

Plenary Speaker, NIOSH, NIEHS, OSHA National Conference on Workplace Safety and Health Training, "Training to Prevent Injury and Illness," St. Louis, MO. October 1999.

Instructor, California Federation of Labor, Ergonomics Awareness Conference and Training of Trainers Workshops, Oakland and Sacramento, CA, March and June, 1998.

Instructor, Western Regional Summer Institute for Union Women, Basic Leadership Skills for Union Activists, Berkeley, CA July, 1998.

Plenary Speaker, University/Public Interest Workshop on Clean Production and Clean Products, sponsored by Center for Clean Production and Lowell Center for Sustainable Production, "Clean Production, Pollution Prevention, and Environmental Justice," University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, May, 1998.

Trainer, American Federation of Teachers, Conference on Human Rights, Workshop on "Environmental Justice: Protecting the Environment," Birmingham, AL, October, 1997.

Plenary Speaker, American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, "The Environment, Public Health, and Social Justice," New York, NY, 1996

Plenary Speaker, Xavier University of Louisiana, "Building Community University Partnerships," New Orleans, LA, November, 1996.

Keynote Speaker, Smithsonian Institution, Forum on Environmental Justice, "Workers of Color: Unfair Choices and Environmental Justice," Washington, DC, October 1995.

Keynote Speaker, Symposium on Health Research and Needs to Ensure Environmental Justice, sponsored by NIEHS, CDC, ATSDR, OSHA, and EPA, Washington, DC, March 1994.

**—COMMUNITY AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY—**

- American Public Health Association, Member
- Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Board of Director
- Public Health Trust, Advisory Board
- University and College Labor Education Association, Member
- American Federation of Teachers, Member
- Liaison Committee, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, "National Occupational Research Agenda," 1996 to present
- Consultant, Clinton Administration Environmental Protection Agency Transition Team. Advised on issues community and workplace "right to know," Washington, DC, December 1992.
- Trainer, German Marshall Fund training for environmental leaders in Eastern Europe, October, 1992.

**—AWARDS AND HONORS—**

Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees Local 2, recipient of annual special recognition award, San Francisco, CA. 1999

Bay Area Asian Pacific American Women's "Women Warrior Award, For Labor and Environmental Justice," San Francisco, CA. April 1996

Scholarship, New World Foundation, invited to South Africa to meet with labor and environmental justice leaders, 1996.

American Public Health Association, Lorin E. Kerr Occupational Section Award. San Diego, November 1995.

Fellowship, Tides Foundation, Charles Bannerman Memorial Fund, for sabbatical research on environmental justice and leadership development in the environmental movement, 1993.



Text of an email from Pamela Tau Lee's father, John Tau

I went to Galileo, but didn't do too well there. That's when Uncle Jimmy Low and John Tome were there. My chemistry partner was Bobby Brown, the Yankee's 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman who still holds the record for pinch hits in a World Series. He also became a famous surgeon. I was a bum. I transferred to Mountain View and one of my classmates was Bob Losey. His name then was Bob Barry, but he changed it to his stepfather's name when he went to Cal. His stepfather owned the restaurant now known as Kip's near the campus. My counselor who gave me the good advice was Mr. Cherry, I think. I left Galileo because I had to go back and help with the flower farm, which I hated. Grandma and I were always with Grandpa except when I was in Chinatown and going to Chinese school at the YMCA where I stayed. Grandma wanted me to go to Chinese school for a year or so. That's when I went to Cal.

Mom's grandpa owned a restaurant in Fresno. That's when my mother and father met your grandma on your Mom's side. Years later, Mom's dad worked for my dad on the flower ranch, but he didn't like it and didn't stay too long. Years later it turned out we lived in the same building at 46 Waverley Place. We were in the back part of the building, I think, while Mom's folks were in front, on the Grant Avenue side. Did you know that Mom and I were brought into the world by the same doctor in Fresno? Talk about coincidences in life. Mom's dad worked as a cook. His last job was with Compton's I think, on Market Street. Mom's grandpa was a real nice guy. Even when he was old, he'd walk all the way to the SP depot and go down to Fresno to see his old friends. Uncle Barry has some pictures of him at his place.

Well, that's about it. Leslie is coming up Tuesday night with the kids.

Will bring Chanter along. See ya.

Love,  
Dad.



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B.A., 1984, University of Arizona, Asian Studies (minor in Forestry).

M.A., 1988, University of Hawaii, Geography. Thesis title: *Forest Perception and Management in Kochi Prefecture, Japan*, based on a year and a half of fieldwork in Japan.

Ph.D., 1997, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, Geography with emphasis on natural resources, forest ecology and management, and geographic information systems. Dissertation title: *Fighting for the Forest: Sustainability and Social Justice in Vallecitos, New Mexico*, based on field work in Vallecitos.

Instructor, University of New Mexico, 1995-1997. Consultant in sustainable agriculture and rural community development to New Mexico State University, 1992-1999.

Interviewer/Editor, Regional Oral History Office, in the field of natural resources and the environment, 1997-2000.

Program Coordinator, U.S. Community Forestry Research Fellowship Program, College of Natural Resources, University of California, Berkeley, 2000-present.









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